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# DON ISAAC ABRAVANEL

*By*

JOSEPH SARACHEK, Ph.D., D.H.L.

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DEDICATED  
TO THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

SARAH REBECCA SARACHEK

DECEASED

JULY 22, 1936



## PREFACE

THE PRESENT WORK is published on occasion of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Don Isaac Abravanel. My interest in this picturesque figure dates back to a prize essay written while I was a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America on "The Messianic Ideas in Abravanel's Writings." The essay is included in the author's volume, "The Doctrine of the Messiah in Medieval Jewish Literature," published by the Seminary in 1932. Later, when I wrote the Abraham Berliner dissertation on the Anti-Maimonean Controversies which has been published under the title, "Faith and Reason: The Conflict over the Rationalism of Maimonides," I again became absorbed in the man Abravanel.

In the preparation of this biography, I have had the generous assistance, both as to content and form, of Rabbi Samuel J. Wolk and I take this means of expressing my profoundest thanks to him. I am in debt also to the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America for providing me with texts and editions of Abravanel's works and other collateral literature.

JOSEPH SARACHEK

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*PART I*

THE MAN



## PART I

### THE MAN

A GREAT man may have a great soul, or a great creative mind, a great talent for political leadership, a great fervor for religious idealism, or a great love for his fellow-man. Greatness rises and falls with the ages of man. What is great in one generation may be small in another. Don Isaac Abravanel lived in an age of rebirth, of discovery, of social and religious ferment. In his day there lived Savonarola, Torquemada, Columbus, Leonardo da Vinci, Copernicus, Reuchlin, Luther, Machiavelli, Erasmus, Elias del Medigo, Obadia di Bertinoro, Abraham Zacuto, Elias Levita. Don Isaac, even as Judah the Prince, combined spiritual eminence and temporal power. The value today of Abravanel's religious notions may be questioned, his Davidic claims may have been sheer pretense, his royal associations may have been but a political maneuver. Don Isaac's greatness lay in his loyalty and devotion to his people and his faith.

Abravanel's reader catches his boundless enthusiasm for the ancient religion of Moses and the rabbis. There is of course much weighing of religious beliefs,



much thoughtful analysis; this is but another facet of his ecstatic and mystic nature. Perhaps his was the frenzied heroism of the soldier of religion holding aloft the banner of God, and fighting in a confused era and in the enemy's camp the evil forces that menaced Judaism, the enemy without that expelled, forcibly baptized and killed Jews and the internal foe of the weak-kneed and yielding. When we speak of Don Isaac's mystic nature we do not imply asceticism or the contemplative life. He was a man of the world, who busied himself with practical, commercial affairs, upon whom family and social ties made strong demands, who was active in the service of his king. But his was nevertheless zealous ardor for his people and religion.

The time in which he lived was the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of a transition era that led into modern times. The world's horizon was steadily growing wider. In his day the first Hebrew Concordance was published; the Jews were charged with the ritual murder of Simon of Trent; the inquisition against the Marranos was established; Pope Sixtus the Fourth denounced the cruelties of the Spanish inquisition; the Jews were expelled from Spain; Columbus discovered America; Judah Leon Abravanel wrote the 'Dialogues of Love'; Asher Lammlein proclaimed himself the forerunner of the Messiah; Gershon Soncinus established a Hebrew printing press in Prague. The geographical discoveries, renaissance motifs, the simmering revolt against

the Church which finally broke forth in the Reformation, the economic and political changes going on within states, the formation of European nationalities, and for the Jews also the Spanish expulsion, provided a dramatic setting for his dynamic personality. This personality can be seen in the three notable features of his life; in the public service he gave to European kings, in the moral and material leadership he offered his suffering people, and most important, in his searching and copious contributions to Hebrew literature.

Useful as his financial career was to the rulers it would of itself not have been enough to distinguish him. From the times of Joseph, Daniel and Mordecai down to Disraeli and our own day, Jews have made their mark as statesmen on a much grander scale than did Abravanel. His philanthropy prompted by the warmest human sympathies and Jewish confraternity was too short-lived. For alas! his own fortune changed and he, too, was shorn of power and means to aid his people. Often he stood in the position of refugee and suppliant instead of benefactor. But it is as a scholar who further adorned the structure of Jewish learning built by earlier masters that he shines in Jewish history. Israel has been surnamed the people of the book; and even as when one wants to understand Israel one turns to its books so also to penetrate into the personality of Don Isaac one will turn to his writings.

The main facts of his dramatic life are quite well-

known to us, thanks to his own habit of enlivening his writings with vivid accounts of his personal and public experiences. The story told in them is depressing. His books are stamped with an ego, a character, tinged by political events in which his own welfare, sometimes his very life, is at stake. We cannot separate the man from his writings, for he studied and penned his lectures not in the quiet of a library, but literally while absorbing the shocks of one calamity after another. During the time he was employed in the king's palace, he had little time to write. And when he was not employed, he was in disfavor and worried by cares and fears. Hence he could not free himself from his environment to present his views on religion and history without opening up to our gaze his troubled soul and the distress of his people. Nor must we forget that Abravanel had a feeling of self-importance and pride. The very fact that three kings of Europe recognized his ability and used his services placed him on a high pedestal as a political figure. When we add to this the ordeals that he went through and the experiences of his people, it would be natural that he would be self-conscious of the part he was playing and that he would seek a literary means to tell posterity of the tragic drama in which he was a main actor.

The nervous strain to which he was subjected by his wanderings and misfortunes has set him up as a type of his people, of Israel, prosperous, pursued



and afflicted. He was the eternal, homeless Jew, welcomed then ejected, fleeing from one country to another, from city to city, hunted by one king, invited by another, falling from honor to disgrace, passing from wealth to poverty, yet never losing confidence in himself, enthusiasm for his people, or trust in God, and able always to re-establish himself and win the ear of king and prince.

## 1

WHEN DON ISAAC was born in Lisbon, capital of Portugal, in 1437, the Jews in the kingdom were enjoying a breathing-spell of prosperity and goodwill. A large class among them had become rich landowners and government officials; they were scientists, manufacturers, traders and skilled artisans. With material success went social prestige. This class acquired Iberian culture, both its serious and superficial sides, aimed high in social life and was progressive in religion. As a group it shied at Jewish affiliations, and evaded the duties of study, charity and piety. There were exceptions, but the situation was bad enough to fill the rabbis with fear about Israel's spiritual future. There were also the faithful masses, the poor and unworldly. But by and large the community was considered affluent, and it was not a stronghold of Judaism.

The political situation was outwardly passable, but was seething beneath. The moment of eruption

was not far off. The legislatures of various states had passed anti-Jewish laws affecting their residence, careers, occupations, mode of travel, style of dress, etc. For example in 1391 the Cortes at Evora decreed that "all Jews of his (King John I) dominions should wear a red star having six points, the size of his round seal, on the breast of the outer garment, at the pit of the stomach, in such manner as to be visible." The execution of this and other harsh legislation was often allowed to lapse. Enacted in a wave of Jew-baiting, when emotions cooled down its enforcement relaxed. Political conditions, too, such as war, annexation of land and treaties often made a scapegoat of the Jew and when conditions changed his position was eased. Sometimes the welfare of the Jew depended upon the character or policy of the monarch.

When Isaac was young Alfonso the Fifth ruled with tolerance. He encouraged Jews to seek personal advancement and to strengthen their communal life. In fact Portugal had been until the Spanish expulsion a place where Jews could live, not free from restriction, but free from violent molestation. They were spared the bloody massacres, the destruction of property and the expulsions that made a nightmare of their history in France, Germany, England and Spain. But neither was Portugal a world center of Jewry as those other lands had been. While Jewish history in those lands is wreathed with hundreds of brilliant minds in the fields of bible, tal-

mud, poetry, philosophy, medicine and the sciences, Portugal has produced but one outstanding figure, Don Isaac Abravanel.

The Jewish population of Portugal was greatly increased by the overflow of the refugees who came from the teeming, doomed communities in the Spanish kingdoms. In fact Don Isaac belonged to the second generation of an immigrant family in Portugal, his father having emigrated from Seville, Spain. Don Isaac hugged the fantastic notion that his family tree could be traced to the Judean exiles of 586 B.C.E. The only basis for this claim is an alleged statement by the scholar Isaac Giat that the Abravanel family settled in Seville at the time of the destruction of the first temple. Having gone back that far there was nothing to stop him from connecting his family with the Davidic dynasty. Yet although he makes this claim in all sincerity, he does not give the names of his ancestors for more than six generations. Whatever prompted him to such self-magnification would be hard to say. His famous son, the philosopher Judah, refers to this pretense in his poems. It is not improbable that Don Isaac's ardent, even ecstatic, faith in the coming of the messiah of Davidic ancestry in his own life-time, and of course in the survival of the Davidic family into his own time, added to an egotism engendered by wealth, social position, learning and honored forbears made him regard himself as a lineal descendant of that illustrious family. His reading of the biblical, "The



scepter shall not depart from Judah nor a lawgiver from between his feet," may have led him to sense that one so entrusted with government affairs and so close with kings as himself was probably related to the Judean rulers, thereby preserving a vestige at least of their ancient power throughout all time.

Certain it is that the family lived for many centuries in Seville in the kingdom of Castile. The claim of a very early settlement in Spain by the Abravanel and other Jewish families was frequently made in defense of their right to live in the realm against the acts of persecution and expulsion by their foes. In a similar vein the German Jews of today dwell upon their one thousand year old residence in their country as a rejoinder to the Nazi pretenses. Neither the immediate nor the distant relatives of Don Isaac are known as rabbis or scholars. They belonged however to the lay aristocracy and seemed to have been prominent as political figures and philanthropists. Some definite facts are known about them, in particular about his grandfather, Don Samuel Abravanel, described by an admirer as a man of intellect, a friend of scholars who sought them out and aided them, and whenever time permitted devoted himself to study. He had been in the service of King Henry the Second of Castile as a financier and had been sent by Spanish Jewry as an envoy to Pope Martin the Fifth to plead for his people. This admirer of his was the talmudist Menahem ben Zerah who had fled from a massacre with

his yeshiva students to his palatial home. Here he probably had the chance to learn at first hand the ways of the upper classes, who because of their high rank, their love for the luxuries and superfluities of life, and the general dislike of Jews by governing officials, cast away inherited ceremonies and rites. This experience led Rabbi Menahem to write "Tzedah Ladederech," a work on the practical side of Judaism, giving the laws and their reasons. He dedicated the book to his benefactor, Don Samuel Abravanel. Indeed so tragic were the persecutions that raged in Spain in 1391, so absolute was the demand for the Jews' conversion that Don Samuel himself became a Christian outwardly, a course not uncommon among the Jews and which had two centuries before been condoned by Maimonides. Don Samuel changed his name to John de Seville in order perhaps not to taint the revered name of his family.

Under these circumstances life in Spain for the children of Israel became unbearable. Many of them looked for refuge elsewhere. Samuel's son Judah bade farewell to his ancestral home in Seville and settled in Lisbon, Portugal. Here he became the financial minister of Prince Fernando. Some inkling of the transactions between Don Judah and the Prince may be gotten from the latter's will drawn in 1437 before going on a military expedition, in which he provided for the repayment to Judah Abravanel of 506,000 reis blancos which the latter had loaned him. In that same year Judah's son,

Isaac, was born. Unlike his sires the latter carved out for himself a career of talented scholarship; he wove together, as the warp and woof of his life, idealism with practicality, namely, a profound knowledge of philosophy and literature and an active dissemination thereof together with the family predilection for government service. Perhaps it would be true to say that his studies were an avocation, done not as a professional function but pursued joyfully as a source of information to others, and as a means of education and a devout religious exercise for himself.

Beyond doubt his life was the most eventful and picturesque of any Jew who lived in his age. From the fact that he completed several philosophic works and began to write his famous biblical discourses while still a young man, and furthermore that his books show a large fund of information, we assume that his education as a lad was both rabbinical and secular. He attended the Lisbon college directed by Rabbi Joseph Hayyun where the bible and talmud with the commentaries were studied. His writings disclose an encyclopedic knowledge of the bible. A man of his convictions and mentality would be thoroughly familiar with the legal contents of the talmud, but the only part that he draws on is the agada or legendary and narrative portion. Next to the bible, the first source of his inspiration and field of labor was the Guide for the Perplexed by Maimonides, who was the hero around whom he assembled the



giants Saadia, Judah Halevi, Levi ben Gerson, Crescas and Albo.

The medieval Jewish student, ambitious for wider education, was not university trained. He achieved it in a hit and miss way both with the aid of private tutors and by his own plodding labors. These were the methods Isaac employed. He had mastered Latin, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, and was intimately familiar with classical, Moslem and Christian literature. He refers to the pre-Socratic philosophers and to Plato and Aristotle. Among several Christian scholars he mentions especially Albertus Magnus and shows a high regard for Thomas Aquinas. Of the Arab theologians, he cites the theories of Algazali, Avicenna and Averroes, the last of whom he affectionately calls the foremost scholar in the world. Whether he approves or rejects their points of view, he always analyzes them minutely. He was fertile in ideas and of subtle and erudite mind.

The wide reading, tolerant manner and mental alertness of Abravanel may be judged from the following passage in his commentary on "The Ethics of the Fathers." "Seneca the philosopher said that one who studies with many teachers is like a stomach that is full of various foods that cannot be digested. Therefore, said Joshua son of Perahya, have a teacher, select one scholar as a teacher and study with him. He also said acquire a friend, so that you may sharpen one another and your studies be successful.... A man will hesitate to argue pro and

con with his teacher on the fine points and he will be left with many doubts and perplexities. But if he has a friend he can argue freely with him. When Ben Zoma said, 'Who is wise? He who learns from everybody,' it does not mean that one should learn from many people at the same time but that he should study with one of them, and then another; or have teachers in different subjects. For example, one should study physical sciences from Aristotle and astronomy from Ptolemy. In each subject he should have a separate teacher. The philosophers say a man without a friend is like the left hand without the right." A pious medieval Jew daily awaiting the coming of the messiah, bringing Seneca and Ptolemy to bear on a passage from the talmud!

Jewish leadership until quite recently had been in the hands of the rabbis. The talmudic master was both judge and priest. It was an authority that was earned by literary plus spiritual eminence. Abravanel was no rabbi, yet he was the most representative Jew in Lisbon and the intellectual leader of the community. Portugal may have been different with respect to the cultivation of and the value placed on talmudic study. In the case of Don Isaac, even though his forte was not halaka (jurisprudence), piety and general Jewish learning were enough to win recognition. Don Isaac's outstanding literary excellence was his knowledge of the bible. His commentaries were the product of lectures delivered to student and lay groups in Portugal, Spain and Italy. As a youth

he mastered the Guide for the Perplexed. It became to him the point of departure for all his theological musing. In Lisbon he wrote two books, one of a few chapters, "The Original Form of the Elements," and the other, "The Crown of the Aged." This second one is a potpourri of religious thought. He joins with certain cosmological notions those doctrines which would serve Israel in that era of misery and religious decline; the divine selection and protection of Israel, the transfigured character of Moses, and the importance of faith and piety over mere intellectualism. In Lisbon too he began a commentary on Deuteronomy. The bulk of his writing, however, was done after he left Portugal in the several places whither he had fled for safety, when he realized that he was not destined to win his spurs in the political and commercial arenas. It was then that he wrote in feverish haste the important books on which his fame rests. Don Isaac admits this mood and motive. He describes with a feeling of remorse how he frittered away his early manhood in Portugal in the ambition to amass wealth and to win renown. It is to the failure of this ambition that we owe Abravanel, the scholar and philosopher.

We may ascribe to the age as much as to the man himself, the lesser caliber of his work, the fact that he lacked the versatility of the scholars who preceded him. He was not a formal teacher or philosophic recluse; he was an intellectual democrat rather than an academician. He was not a legalist,



poet, physician, mathematician or astronomer. Many of the earlier scholars of Spain and other lands combined all or some of these vocations. Learned, capable and creative as he was, he yet stands as the mark of the decline of the golden Spanish era.

The light of that era continued to flicker on in him, fed by the oil of the fifteenth century. He was a product of this century. Although rejecting the extreme implications of the Renaissance, of throwing overboard the authority of traditional religion, he yet absorbed much of its purpose and method. He shows the historian's curiosity about the development of the social and political life of mankind and of certain nations. For this purpose he had read classical and current histories. Throughout his writings there is manifest the point of view of a literary critic. "The Song of the Sea" in Exodus is examined as a piece of poetry and Aristotle's "Poetics" is cited to prove a point. Elsewhere he tells of the ancient custom to compose songs celebrating the heroism and victory of warriors. In dealing with the prophets, he discusses their style and rhetoric. In tune with the Renaissance spirit he had a high admiration for the classic peoples. "As for the sons of Japheth from whom descended the Greeks and Romans, how beautiful are all their deeds, their conduct, their politics, the manner of their rule and their prowess; all of them are beautiful in form and appearance."

He knew the Jewish rationalism of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and did not escape

the charm of its logic. He studied and read its agitational literature, but did not succumb to it. He called a halt when he suspected a denial of revelation or felt that the bible's infallibility was in danger.

In addition to his gifts of the love of learning and of the ability to digest the wisdom of the world and to form a philosophy of Judaism impregnated with the peculiar atmosphere of the day, Abravanel was also blessed materially. The official position held by his father in the Portuguese government brought him immense wealth and the most desirable connections. The family mansion became the scene of pompous gatherings of Jewish and Christian aristocracy. Scholars, physicians, church dignitaries, government officials and noted travelers deemed it an honor to enjoy the friendship of this ancient, renowned family. Its wealth and wisdom could prove a blessing to one in need and they were coveted by many. Don Isaac, who inherited his father's fortune and fame, was appointed by Alfonso the Fifth almost as a vested right to be his financial agent. Closely knit loyalties had sprung up between Don Isaac and the country's powerful coteries. Among these were Prince Fernando de Braganza and his two brothers, whose confidant he became. This family, related to the king, enjoyed great popularity, was in control of the army and owned cities and vast lands.

Throughout the ages individual Jews were found necessary by kings and princes for two different

functions, as physicians and as financiers. In view of the general dislike of the Jew, and especially of the laws prohibiting him from holding public office, one must look to his peculiar life and social status in answer to this anomaly. Because of the restrictions under which he lived during the middle ages which made it impossible for him to own land and to engage in such pursuits as agriculture and manufacture, and furthermore because of the constant and imminent fear of expulsion and wandering he was led perforce to earn his living by means of that most portable of goods, money. He thus became an expert in political economy and finance. The concern for diet and health which his religion imposed on him, as well as his love of learning and his analytical mind, led the Jew to such sciences as anatomy, physiology and pathology. We are not at all surprised therefore at finding great proficiency in medicine among the children of Israel. Hence the demand for their services as physicians and financiers. Another reason was that the king found less to fear of conspiracy and treachery from the Jew whose very right to live in the land was derived from the king and for whom the king was often a protector against the irrational outbursts of the ignorant masses. As an alien, one merely tolerated, the Jew was less likely to join in the frequent uprisings against constituted authority. Thus civil and church law notwithstanding, kings and princes regularly turned to the Jew for his able and patriotic service.



In no case need we believe was the Jewish financier in supreme charge, but rather that he served as one of many important officials in the financial department of the government. He might arrange commercial treaties with other countries, or assume responsibility for the farming and tax yield of certain districts. In most cases, as in that of Don Isaac, he was the personal agent of the king, buying provisions for the palace, administering the king's estate and furnishing provisions and arms for the king's army. Frequently he lent his own money or obtained loans from other people for the needs of the government.

It is almost certain that as a fiscal minister Don Isaac met Columbus who from 1472 to 1474 made efforts to get financial support from the king of Portugal for his sailing project. Columbus' manifold association with Jews, as evidenced by his use of maps, instruments and charts made by Jewish astronomers, and also by the presence of several Jews on his expedition, makes it likely that he knew the leading Jew of Portugal. It is even less doubtful that the two met later in Toledo, when Abravanel together with Louis de Santangel gave the Spanish Queen Isabella 1,200,000 maravedis to help finance the trip of the explorer.

Calculating financier and analytical theologian, Abravanel's warm heart pulsed sympathetically to the agony of his people's lot. The privileges he enjoyed placed upon him a serious social obligation

to protect the lost sheep of Israel. Often he came to their rescue and stirred the conscience of other rich Jews. A typical instance was the capture of two hundred and fifty Jews by Alfonso the Fifth when he seized the city of Arzilla near Tangiers. Don Isaac, in the merciful Jewish tradition of redeeming captives, organized a committee of twelve men who toured the country and collected ten thousand gold doubloons, about 80,000 dollars, for that purpose. The freed captives were brought to Portugal where they were harbored until able to shift for themselves. Abravanel had appealed also to Jews outside the country for aid. Jehiel of Pisa, a pious and learned man and a financial magnate of Tuscany with an outstanding reputation for using his wealth on behalf of his distressed people, received such a request. It was Jehiel's money that provided shelter for all needy Jews who drifted into Italy during the Spanish expulsion. Abravanel's letter to him containing the above mentioned appeal was put into the hands of Don Isaac's Christian friend, John Sezaro, a physician, on his way as one of a Portuguese delegation to Pope Sixtus the Fourth to congratulate him on the first anniversary of his elevation. One notes with more than passing interest the tokens of esteem sent by Don Isaac to his Italian friend, a copy of his religious work, "The Crown of the Aged," a first draft of his commentary on Deuteronomy, and for Jehiel's wife, an African female slave.

In his letter Don Isaac asks Jehiel to give a warm



reception to the Portuguese visitors and to flatter their king before them. He inquires of him whether the pope is friendly to the Jews; whether he or the cardinals at Rome have Jewish physicians and if so, to let him know their names. Abravanel shows his anxiety concerning the welfare and the very life of his coreligionists. Brooding over the troublous days, he declares that lust for money has become an obsession with the persecuting Christians; they have made gold their god; they will stop at nothing in their desperation to get money, even to criminal extortion from Jews. But gold, the sage comforts himself, never was, nor could ever be the objective, the be-all and end-all of Jewish life. Jews have other delights and compensations. The Law is their lasting blessing. What the enemy filches from them is only brass. God will return them the equivalent of real gold and silver. "The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich."

Clearly Abravanel saw the handwriting on the wall. During the rule of Alfonso the Fifth, the lot of the Jews was not unhappy. But when this ruler was succeeded by his son John the Second in 1481 a decisive change in their status occurred. The new king reversed the state policy of his father. Encouraged by his attitude the church and legislatures clamored for the enforcement of the old, anti-Jewish laws. Small of mind and narrow of heart, King John clamped down on real and imaginary foes. His mean soul was further constricted by the fear common to

all dictators of the possible rise of rivals. He embarked also on a plan to build up a strong monarchy and to expand Portuguese territory at the expense of Spain and France. In both of these attempts he aroused the opposition of feudal lords. He showed an all too common ruthlessness toward persons of independence and influence. Suspecting the Duke of Braganza of conspiring with Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain against him, John had him executed. The king sent also for Don Isaac, a friend of the Braganza family, whom he charged with being in the plot. On his way to the palace Abravanel was warned of the king's intention to take his life. Hurrying home, he seized his wife and two of his three sons, Joseph and Samuel, and fled in the dead of night across the border to Segura de la Orden in Spain. This was in 1483.

The first act of Don Isaac on reaching Spanish soil was to dispatch a letter to the king in which he pleaded innocence of any crime and pointed to his faithful satisfactory service. He goes to the defense of his friend the duke. "Save, O king; is it well for you to oppress? Shall the judge of a whole country not do right? Why have you done evil to your servant? Why have you thrust me out? Let me know what you charge me with; why you contend against me? Prove and try me, my lord; no effort to bring guilt home to me will succeed." A year after Don Isaac had left Portugal King John formally accused him of conspiracy, of financing and advising his ene-

mies and condemned him to death. His property was confiscated. Many years later Don Isaac's son Judah in one of his poems revealed that the king himself created the situation which gave him the necessary pretense to persecute his father.

It was ever the fate of the Jew to be the scapegoat of political rivalries, the victim of human greed for power. Loyalty and useful service have not proved a defense against the violence and fury which were a result of the weaknesses and conflicts within governments. Thus closed the first act in the dramatic career of Don Isaac. It had been a beautiful dream and he always reverted to the happy scenes of his life in Lisbon. But it ended sorrowfully. Henceforth, Don Isaac became a man without a country.

## 2

THE MASSACRES of 1391 in Spain began a reign of organized terror against the Jews that lasted for one hundred years and was climaxed by the expulsion of 1492. The persecution took three forms; humiliation, inquisition, and murder and theft. Moral perversion in those days, as too often in ours, took the form of a sadistic delight to bend the back and break the spirit of the proud, the fearless and the creative. The Christian leaders thought to bolster their own position and control over the populace by imposing upon the Jew who remained loyal to his Judaism such humiliating yokes as the twenty-four anti-



Jewish articles of King John the Second which included wearing a badge, forced attendance at Christian sermons, theological debates with bishops, prohibition of the study of the talmud and the stupid blood accusations.

The second form of persecution was heresy hunting among the secret Jews, the Marranos. The first move in the church's war on them was made in 1451 when Pope Nicholas the Fifth authorized the appointment of inquisitors. The movement grew to full fury in 1483 when the priest Torquemada was selected as inquisitor-general of Spain, at the time Don Isaac came to that country. The Marranos were active as financiers, judges and legislators. They were recruited largely from the upper classes, who had most to lose in wealth and social position from the church's intolerance. They wanted to eat their cake and have it, to remain Jews and at the same time hold on to their preferred status in a Christian society. And so outwardly they lived as Christians but in their hearts and in their homes they retained much of their faith and customs. This subterfuge had been practiced by Jews in Spain and North Africa for many centuries when they lived under Islam, but now it had become very general in Christian lands also; with this difference that the arrangement was easier under Islam for Islam required only an affirmation about Allah and Mohammed, but did not insist on ceremonial conformity. Moreover there was an affinity of language, race and even ceremonies

between Judaism and Islam, whereas Christianity spurned and damned the Jew as the great offender against its saviour and also demanded of the convert the meticulous observance of the regulations of the church.

It is not for us to pass judgment on him who to save his very life adopts an inconsistent solution. The Jewish sages have long established the rule that the Jew need not jeopardize his life or health in the observance of Judaism, with three exceptions, Idolatry, Adultery and Murder. Rather than commit any of these three, say the sages, the Jew should choose death. To practice a religion such as Christianity was not considered idolatry. The rabbis have shown their merciful regard for human life by permitting such a conditional conversion. Abravanel follows this noble precedent. He has nothing but sympathy and praise for the Marranos who still remembered their Judaism even though secretly. They should not be looked upon as deserters but rather should be welcomed into the congregation and be given freely all its rights and honors.\*

In addition to the deliberate policy of degrading the Jew and persecuting the Marrano, church and state combined to wreak upon all Jews, professed and clandestine, death and destruction, violence to life and property. If the Jew was not amenable to the suggestion of the badge and the heresy-hunt, then let him die. Trapped by the subtle cruelties

\* Mashmia Yeshua, II, 2.



of their foes, the Jews fled in bewilderment from one Spanish kingdom to another, from city to city, to find temporary shelter turned to certain death. Innumerable were the individuals and congregations who in love gave themselves to the slaughter for the sanctification of God's name. Thus grew the golden roll of Jewish martyrs.

There were a great many, however, who could not stand the strain. They weakened and went over to Christianity. Some were induced by the removal of restrictions and the grant of new privileges, such as exemption from taxes, the opening to them of government and church positions and even guarantees of a livelihood. They were protected against any discrimination or loss of legal rights they might suffer from the Jewish community or their families. There were undoubtedly those who were sincere in their new professions. Certain of the apostates became powerful figures in the church. Learned in bible and talmud, informed on the Jewish attitude toward the dominant religion, they became the most useful tools of the enemies of Judaism. They opposed the rabbis in the public theological disputes, preached impassioned sermons which Jews were forced to hear and published defamatory writings. As is probably true of all converts, they hounded their former coreligionists with more venom and vindictiveness than did the church itself. Answering to the inglorious roll-call of apostates who carried on their nefarious work in Spain were especially these

four: Abner of Burgos; Pablo Christiani, who argued against Nahmani in the Barcelona disputation; Paul de Santa Maria, who became archbishop of Burgos; and Geronimo de Santa Fé, who fought against his own people so furiously in the notorious Tortosa debate that lasted twenty-one months. In this gruesome sport which the enemy forced them to play, the odds were against them.

Fifteenth century Spain saw the Jews with their backs against the wall. It was but natural that internally, too, they had lost vigor. That which we call the golden era of the Jew in Spain had long ago passed. That age animated by brilliant intellectual activity, by fertility in philosophy, poetry, bible and talmud, had flickered out. All that was now a memory. New forces estranged their interests and diverted them from the purposes of their forbears. Their civil status had grown continually worse and the skeptical saw no comfort or strength in the old loyalties. Christian Spain supplanted the scientific richness and literary color of Islam and expanded along political and economic lines, thereby offering new prizes in place of the earlier ones.

Indeed there was talmudism and there was orthodoxy in Spain. These had their patrons. But they had become the special interest of one party, of some, instead of the concern of all Jews. And even in those quarters where they were so minded, they had lost much of their former dignity and urgency. The study of the talmud had become a mental

exercise, a course of study rather than a matter of devotion and piety. A conflict of purposes had crept into the minds of the talmudists; they were concerned not so much with discovering the inner meaning of the laws as in exhibiting their skill in argument. Jewish scholarship was at low ebb. It was cultivated largely by the poor who lived on communal funds. Solomon Alami, writing in this century, denounced the wealthy, easy-going and selfish men, who refused to aid needy scholars. So loathsome and hopeless is their lot, said he, that it is difficult to get young people to choose a rabbinical career.

The philosophers were not the versatile scholars or the deep thinkers of the golden age. They retraced the steps taken by Maimonides and Levi ben Gerson in the investigation of the doctrines by the formal rules of logic and by the aid of Islamic and Christian theological writing. In Abravanel's time the free-thinking Jews were Averroists who denied or set up doubts about creation, providence, personal immortality, human free-will and salvation through pious living. They tinkered with the bible in their effort to reconcile it with their own philosophies. What hurt the unworldly talmudists was that these rationalists followed the policy of a certain Christian Averroist to "think with the few and speak with the many." The talmudists thundered against them as traitors to Judaism, as flirting with Christianity and as causing the decline in synagogue at-



tendance, sacred study and ritual observance. There was a group of talmudists to which belonged men like Crescas and Albo who could wield the apparatus of logic and could draw on secular knowledge. From this quarter came well-thought-out expositions of Judaism from the revelationist point of view. Its leaders took issue with the premises used by Maimonides and his disciples and they were a match for the more progressive philosophers of the day.

Another religious tendency was the cabala or mysticism. Its strange, otherworldly theosophy which took in the nature of God, the hierarchy of angels, the universe of spheres and the fate of man had another side of rank abuses and absurdities. Jewish mysticism is either moralistic or magical. In Abravanel's time, the second kind with all its symbolism and superstition had reached large scale development. The mystics aggressively fought both the rationalists and the talmudists, the former for seizing upon formal logic and the sciences as the only roads to enlightenment; the latter for relying on mental skill and achievement rather than on their mystical interpretation of the religious life.

Such were the cultural currents that flowed through the Jewish community when Don Isaac escaped to Toledo in 1483. His property in Portugal as well as that of his son Judah who remained behind as a practicing physician was confiscated. But he had managed to take some capital with him. This plus his financial experience, his learning and the reputa-

tion of his Spanish sires made it easy for him to take up life in the new home. Here the synagogue and lecture hall beckoned to him. He met the head of the Yeshiva in Toledo, Isaac Aboab, and was received with warmth and respect by prominent Jews. He at once began to lecture publicly on the bible, at the same time writing down his lectures, and so within the space of two years he completed the commentaries on the historical books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

But he was not destined to continue very long at the scholar's desk. In 1484 King Ferdinand invited him to be the collector of royal revenues. This in spite of laws against Jews holding public office and the furious onslaught upon them by the Dominicans. Pope Sixtus the Fourth protested the appointment. That Don Isaac was able to serve in that position for eight years shows how indispensable his services were regarded by the desperate king. For desperate he was. Embroiled in final war with the Moors, leading his army in person, he had need of money and unquestioned loyalty. Both of these he could get from Don Isaac, his other Jewish financier, Abraham Senior of Segovia, and from Alfonso de la Calaberia, a Marrano who championed the cause of the Jews.

Abravanel welcomed the opportunity to serve Ferdinand. Not only was finance his vocation, but also in the ominous clouds that hung so low over his people, he could not help but feel that close associa-



tion with the ruler would stand them in good stead if disaster should threaten. Leading Jews proudly regarded Ferdinand as their pillar and protector, as was his father King Juan of Aragon. This sure confidence was partly justified. Ferdinand came of Jewish blood; his mother was Johanna Henriques, daughter of the Castilian admiral Frederick Henriques, and granddaughter of the Jewess Palma of Toledo. Jews and Marranos surrounded him and supplied him with money for his wars, government and even for his marriage. His union with Isabella had been opposed by the nobility, no doubt because they feared that a centralized and united Spain would deprive them of their lands and power. The Jews favored it. Abraham Senior, the chief collector of taxes, actually arranged the marriage. Ferdinand stayed in his home in Castile when he came secretly to meet Isabella. Could there be any closer alliance between a ruler and his Jewish subjects?

Either the Jews did not understand Ferdinand, or they played the hand wrong. For when he gained his ends, the marriage and the defeat of the Moors, he turned against the very men who backed him. As statesmen Ferdinand and Isabella successfully advanced the cause of Spanish national unity, but as man and woman their character was ignoble. Isabella was out to crush everyone who did not see eye to eye with her on questions of state and religion. Love for the Church meant hate for all outside of it. The world's opinion of Ferdinand is summed up

as follows by a modern historian: "Diplomacy was unquestionably his forte; and as the diplomacy of the time consisted chiefly in lying, we need not wonder that Machiavelli held him up as a model for princes in his skill at 'playing the fox.'"

While the rulers were still at Granada celebrating the overthrow of the last stronghold of the Moors in Europe they signed the edict of expulsion on March 30th, 1492. "In our kingdoms there are not a few who follow Jewish ways. We arranged that the Inquisition should be established, which has now been carrying on its work for twelve years and has brought many guilty persons to their just punishment. According to the report which has been furnished to us by the Inquisitors, there can be no doubt that the intercourse of Christians with Jews causes the greatest harm. This had as an inevitable consequence the undermining and humiliation of the Catholic faith. We have therefore resolved to banish all Jews of both sexes beyond the borders of our realm forever. We therefore decree herewith that all Jews dwelling within the confines of our dominion—without distinction of sex or age—must leave our royal possessions and seigniories, not later than the end of July of the present year and that they shall not venture to enter them again under any pretext whatsoever. In order, however, that the Jews may be in a position to wind up their businesses, we guarantee them our royal protection, as well as the security of their lives and possessions,

until the end of July. We permit them in addition to take out of the four kingdoms, by land or by water, their property, with the exception of gold, silver, coined gold, and other objects which fall under the general export prohibition." The alternative to expulsion was baptism. Death was the penalty for any Jew who remained in the realm unbaptized after the thirty-first of July, 1492.

History gives varied verdicts on Torquemada. He was a pious Christian, living within the narrow sphere of his beliefs, fanatically a product of his age, and yet there were those whom the age did not so circumscribe. Legend has a morbid tale to tell of a scene played by the principal actors in this tragedy. Don Isaac felt that he had come to official estate for such a time as this, and he did not hold his peace. He pleaded with the king that the life of his people be given him at his petition. He further offered him 30,000 ducats to have the measure suspended. The king was perhaps about to consent when Torquemada, the church's Inquisitor-General, appeared before them. Throwing the crucifix at the floor, the priest shouted, "Judas Iscariot sold his master for thirty pieces of silver. Your Highness would sell him anew for thirty thousand. Here he is, take him and barter him away."

The Jews prayed to God, they fasted, but relief and deliverance were not to arise to them from any place. Abravanel writes, "And the Jews said to one another, Let us gather strength for our religion and



the Torah of our God. If we survive 'tis well, and if they see fit to put us to death, then let that be our fate. We will not violate our sacred covenant with God. We will not turn back our hearts. We will walk in the name of the Lord our God." The fateful day came. By a strange historical coincidence it had long been a day of fasting and lamentation, *tisha b'ab*, the anniversary of the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. We do not know how many turned coat to save their skin. Abraham Senior, treasurer of Castile, a leader who had heretofore protected his people and was present when Abravanel pleaded with the king, chose the alternative of baptism together with his son-in-law Meir Melammed and their whole family. Together with his people, Abravanel preferred the wanderer's staff to the allurements of a strange religion.

Spain at this time had a population of some ten million people. Three hundred thousand Jews left their native land never to return. The full value of their real estate and other property, according to Abravanel, amounted to thirty million gold ducats. He contrasts the golden age of the past with the sad present, the once teeming life in the cities, the people's passionate devotion to literature, sacred and secular, their high morality, philanthropy and piety. He recalls the grand style in which they lived, their wealth and pomp. Now they were forced to leave by land and sea. Shorn of their property, paralyzed with fear and put into the care of con-

scienceless guards and ship captains, most of them perished before reaching a place of refuge. They died of dread diseases while marching on the way; worry and mortification killed others; hunger and cold took their victims; those sold into slavery succumbed under the yoke; many committed suicide by leaping from the boats into the sea, by poison, by strangulation. The corsairs robbed and killed the fugitives. Of all those that had left Spain scarcely ten thousand survived.

Among the prominent exiles besides Abravanel were Isaac Aboab, head of the Yeshiva in Guadalajara, Jacob Habib, head of the Yeshiva in Salamanca and author of the "Ayn Jacob," Isaac Caro, Isaac Companton, Isaac Arama, author of "Akedat Yizhak" and Abraham Zacuto. Zacuto was the foremost mathematician in Spain whose astronomical charts Columbus used and was also the author of the famous biographical history, "Sefer Yuhasin." Another scholar of repute among the exiles was Joseph Jabez who in his anti-philosophic work, "The Light of Life" gives the orthodox reaction to that great calamity. There is something pitiful in his self-accusatory attitude. He and other teachers of his type held to the law of cause and effect in the spiritual realm. It was the kind of thinking that underlies the Mosaic curses and blessings, the prophetic doom and comfort, namely, that Israel's welfare depends upon obedience or disobedience to the word of God. Swayed by such ideas the orthodox



took the tragic events as the deserved punishment of the people for their guilt in wilfully neglecting Judaism. They complained about the decline of rabbinic Judaism, that talmudic students exchanged their sacred learning for worldly wisdom when they grew to maturity, or cast away scholarship entirely for mercantile careers. The accusing finger was pointed at the rationalizers who were charged with opening the door to irreligion and apostasy and thus bringing down divine wrath on the innocent and guilty. Such theological reasoning baffles us. We should look for the root causes, the motives, elsewhere.

The missionary program and fanaticism of the Dominicans were fiercely turned against the Jews, now that the Arabs had been suppressed. Spain was to become one hundred percent Christian. Isabella burned with holy zeal to save the Jews by way of the church. She felt that her own salvation depended largely on their conversion. Furthermore unity of religion was deemed to be the cornerstone of the movement toward centralization of all political forces in Spain. The newly created united kingdom and the growth of the national spirit raised the political question whether the Jew should be tolerated in the new state. Ferdinand and Isabella, who had always been in financial need, regarded the inquisition and the expulsion as a convenient and legal way to confiscate the property of a wealthy section of the nation and thus enrich themselves and the state. The rulers were supported in this policy by

the envy of church officials and of ambitious nobles who were stirred by the economic independence of the Marranos. The church ostensibly protested the two-facedness of the conversos, but really it wanted to remove them as a political and economic factor in the government. Fuel was added to this jealous spirit by the ostentation of rich Jews who copied their Christian neighbors in flaunting their gay apparel, jewels, carriages and beasts.

Whatever the exact forces that brought about the disaster of 1492 may have been the victims were rendered helpless and prostrate by it. Not a voice anywhere was raised in their behalf by any state or by the universal church. No defense of the Jew, no mitigation of his cruel plight, no clemency. The medieval world could not feel with Israel in his overwhelming tragedy. To the non-Jew it was just another expulsion like the earlier ones from France and England. Perhaps centuries of continuous persecution had dulled the Christian's sensibilities. Medieval Europe was not overly humane.

One detailed item draws our interest. Before the order of expulsion was carried out the government settled its financial accounts with Don Isaac and ordered the payment of 1,500,000 maravedis to him which he had lent Ferdinand and Isabella in the Moorish war. He was given special permission to take some gold and silver with him. Was it their high regard for Don Isaac, or did a qualm of conscience finally attack their pious majesties?

The break-up of Jewish life in Spain with the new problems created by the exiles' settlement in other lands cast the Jew into despair. This state of affairs produced as it often did before and since a mystic reaction. People and teachers felt the world was coming to an end; they sublimated their defeats by visions of another world. They projected a millennium. We thus find the rise in the decades that followed of the false messiahs Asher Lammlein and David Reubeni. It is not impossible that the Abravanel expected a messiah to spring out of their own family in the near future as appears from their frequent mention of their Davidic descent.

## 3

THE PANIC-STRICKEN exiles fled in many directions. About one third, or 100,000 of them, went to nearby Portugal where the similarity of language and custom would make it easy for them to acclimatize themselves. Cherishing the hope that the decree would be repealed, they felt they could with ease return to their 'home'. The story of their stay in Portugal, however, is a heart-rending repetition of what happened in Spain, for after several years of torment they were expelled from there too. Other groups of exiles set out for the Kingdom of Navarre, or went to Turkey, to Greece and to North Africa. Many Jews turned to Italy. They had sent a delegation to ask King Ferdinand of the Kingdom



of Naples to admit them. Upon his consent Don Isaac with his family and a large group found refuge there. The ruler apparently saw in the newcomers a source of strength and support. Don Isaac's financial ability was recognized by an invitation to become the king's treasurer. When an epidemic occurred among the immigrants, the Christians demanded that they be deported. But the king refused. They might have remained and flourished had not another event beyond his control overwhelmed the country and doomed the fresh arrivals to disaster. The French king, Charles the Eighth, decided on war with Naples, invaded it and devastated the state. Again, the Jews were driven forth after being stripped of their earthly goods. Their numbers were further reduced by suicide, apostasy and the wilful destruction of their lives by treacherous guides and sea captains.

Don Isaac lost his wealth and his home. His large library was scattered, part of it being sent to Salonica where a son, Samuel, lived. Lamenting the loss of a certain book, he says, "I do not have that treatise with me in Venice, for with all my other books which were left over from the holocaust and were saved from the plunderers I sent it to Salonica, planning to go there because of the severity of the war; therefore from the broken fragments of knowledge stored away in my memory, I will proffer you this information." Alfonso the Second succeeded his father Ferdinand in 1494 and had to flee from the



invader. The loyal Don Isaac accompanied him to Messina, Sicily. His son, the physician Judah, went to Genoa where he wrote in Italian his philosophic masterpiece, "The Dialogues of Love."

When after some months Alfonso died, Don Isaac went to Corfu where a lull in the storm enabled him to resume his literary labors. A great joy came to him at that time, breaking through the gloom of his miserable life. He wept when in distant Corfu, after a lapse of over ten years, he found a copy of his unfinished commentary on Deuteronomy which he had begun in Lisbon. This book he had cherished deeply. He had sent several copies to various scholars throughout the world for suggestions and opinions. In his wanderings his precious book was lost. As a miracle the unfinished work came into his hands again. In Corfu he completed it. There he also had the mental repose to begin his commentary on Isaiah.

His stay on the Isle of Corfu lasted until the French had evacuated Naples. He then settled in Monopoli, in the Kingdom of Naples, where he lived for eight years. His family had scattered. "My wife and my sons are away from me and in another country and I am left by myself alone, an alien in a strange land." Many of his books were written here, the commentaries on Isaiah, on the Passover haggadah, and on the Ethics of the Fathers. The latter is dedicated to his son, Samuel, who had been sent to Salonica for his Hebrew education. The author

makes a pathetic appeal to his son to study, to remain steadfast to Judaism. He talks sadly of his own plight and the insecurity of Israel. In biblical phrase he adjures his son, "If you will forget the law of God, may my right hand forget its cunning; if you forsake the teaching of your mother, my grief will be doubled." The aging parent recognizes his day as one of conflict where medievalism and modernism touched and clashed with each other. He senses the spirit of the Renaissance, the new vistas that were opening for the human mind. He recalls to his son that Judaism does not neglect the natural sciences (Bereshith) and metaphysics (Mercabah). Samuel later proved a source of comfort to his father. He had a brilliant career as a banker, philanthropist and Jewish leader in Naples.

The effect of his own and his people's harrowing experiences was to kindle in Don Isaac the ancient hope of Israel's miraculous deliverance and of divine vengeance upon their torturers. The stage was set for the messiah's advent. Trusting in God, taking the bible promises literally and supported now by events which fitted the pattern of a pre-messianic era, he was convinced that the messiah was on his way. To this faith we owe his escapist literature, the three messianic books written in his old age. These were not an escape from reality to illusion, but from this world of illusion to the true and blessed kingdom that should follow. To him the advent was not an idle dream, the last straw of a drowning

man, but an essential and integral feature of Jewish and universal striving for perfectionism. The power of wickedness and error in the world must be destroyed. The oppression of Israel is a sign of mankind's depravity. The God of justice and mercy cannot allow the rule of iniquity to control affairs indefinitely.

In 1503, at the age of 66, Don Isaac came to Venice in whose republican and hospitable atmosphere he found final peace and repose. He speaks glowingly of the beautiful and benevolent "Queen of the Adriatic." Here he completed his exposition of the first four books of Moses and wrote commentaries on Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the minor prophets. Here too his abilities in finance were recognized. At the special request of the Venetian government he arranged the terms of a commercial treaty between Portugal and Venice dealing with the importing of spices from Portuguese colonies.

But the brightest mark of his old age was the endearing comradeship of his son whose loving care and brilliant fame cheered him and sustained his broken body. In Venice Don Isaac lived at the home of his son Judah, a fascinating character and a man of distinguished powers, a cultured Renaissance Jew. Especially notable is the admiration he felt for his father. By profession a physician he had served as such to King Federigo of Naples in 1501 and had attended the celebrated Captain Gonsalvo de Cordova from 1505 to 1507 when the latter was in



Naples on a military expedition with Ferdinand, king of Spain. Gonsalvo helped acquire Naples for the ambitious Spanish king. The latter thereupon wanted the Jews expelled from his new possession but Gonsalvo advised against it. The king however did succeed in having Gonsalvo break his connection with Judah. Don Judah was even more famous as a philosopher, as the author of a popular work on love and hate as the two-fold axis on which the universe revolves. He had come under the influence of Pico della Mirandola and had studied philosophy at the Platonic academy in Florence and in similar schools in Naples. Even as the son found much to admire in his father, so did Don Isaac call Judah the choice philosopher of the age.

Born in Portugal in 1460 Judah followed his father to Spain. In the poem "An Elegy on the Times" composed in 1503 in Naples, he describes graphically his experiences following the expulsion, including the gruesome tale of his kidnaped infant son Isaac. He intended this poem, which consisted of a complaint and an appeal, to reach the hand and heart of his beloved child. When the Jews were driven from Spain, Ferdinand wanted Judah to remain as his physician fearing the lack of physicians as a result of the expulsion. This could be possible only if Judah turned Christian which the king knew Judah would not do. He therefore planned the stratagem of baptizing Judah's one-year-old son, thus forcing the father to do likewise in order to be near



the child. Both alternatives were cruel for Judah, one to turn traitor to his conscience and people, the other to forsake his child in fleeing with the other exiles. But the father decided on another solution. He secretly sent the child with a faithful servant to Portugal, out of the Gehenna that was Spain, while he went to his father in Naples. In the poem Judah laments that the fire of Portuguese hatred was even worse than that of Spain. King John of Portugal, the same from whom Don Isaac fled, still hated the Jews and the Abravanel family. When the exiles had come there through an arrangement for a temporary stay, they soon learned that they were to experience a repetition of their fate in Spain. In 1495 the new ruler Emanuel planned the wholesale conversion of the Jews. Unable to progress with this plan, he conceived the idea of the forcible conversion of all Jewish children under the age of fourteen. Judah's son, Isaac, was six years old when he was baptized. In the elegy sent to the child, the father recounts the story of the expulsion, the fame of the Abravanel family in Jewish history, the glory and accomplishments of his illustrious grandfather Don Isaac, and adds the prayer that his beloved child may return to the fold and his family. Certain records lead us to suppose that the pious wish of the father was ultimately realized.

In 1507 took place an important exchange of philosophic letters between our author Don Isaac and a young admirer and intellectual Saul Hacoen of

Crete. It shows the lively interest in Maimonides' Guide and in philosophic thought in Jewish circles. Northern Italy was the center of Aristotelianism which radiated from the university of Padua. Saul Hacoen was anxious to clear up some difficulties that troubled him. Even making allowance for the inflated rhetorical praise he bestows upon the aged scholar, his opinion agrees with that which history has formed of him. The fame of Don Isaac's scholarship first reached him through travelers from Rome. This led to an eager study of his books which easily stamped their author as the ablest Jewish philosopher of the day. Abravanel, he found, was pre-eminent as a scholar, had a knowledge of European languages and literature, and was a thorough-going thinker. He knew of his generous self-sacrifices in behalf of his people in the days when their cup of sorrow ran over.

In taking the liberty of writing to the sage, Saul Hacoen offers his credentials, the several books he has written and his pupilage under the illustrious Elijah del Medigo who lectured on philosophy at the universities of Padua and Florence. He knows the scholars David ibn Yahya, Eliezer Alamanso and Moses ibn Habib, and ventures to say that the latter is wrong in finding the source of an Aristotelian statement in Themistius' commentary on "De coelo." Abravanel must have been pleased with his opinion that Narboni is not reliable, "he is as enigmatic in his philosophy as Ibn Ezra on the

torah." One wonders, though, what was Abravanel's reaction to Saul's estimate of Abraham Bibago as the perfect philosopher. For ever so many years Saul Hacoen states he has been vexed over the exact meaning of certain concepts and phrases, such as, final or ultimate form, the throne of God and the image of God as treated in the Guide. He asks him to verify statements in the Guide attributed to Aristotle. He makes inquiry about the "De intentione" of Algazali and Narboni's comments thereon, about syllogisms, and about a contradiction in Aristotle of what constitutes final bliss.

In his answer written one year before his death, Don Isaac reveals himself in his saintliness. We find enthusiasm, cordiality and great industry despite old age. The feeble scholar compliments the pious seeker after further light in religion for his elegant use of Hebrew and for his intellectual curiosity. It is good to note, he says, that the day-dreaming and incapacity of the old generation is offset by the lofty striving and clear vision of the young. His reply was rather lengthy, requiring research in the rationalistic commentaries on the Guide, in Aristotle, Algazali, Avicenna and Averroes. It shows familiarity with formal logic. He takes great pains to answer the youth, "I am now advanced in years, my hands are heavy from old age, and the light of my eyes is not with me; my secretary who was with me in Venice has gone to Palestine. There is no one to assist me and as a result this reply to you is



written in Ashkenazic script, to which I am not accustomed."

Don Isaac combines humility with self-respect. He invites the inquirer to spend several years at his home that he may open up the beautiful vista of the Guide for the Perplexed to him. "Would that you were like a brother to me! Become my companion, if you would know my method in the interpretation of this profound book which is different from the method of other expositors. I would lead and bring you into the innermost compartments. I would give you drink of the spiced wine of Maimonides' intellect. I would teach you as a father his son. Perhaps you would have done more wisely had you come to me here. You and I would then in God's name study this book from beginning to end as I should love to do.... Who is the man who in his youth will not set out on a journey to a distant land for two or three years to engage in business, to profit financially? Why will you then be like one horrified or a helpless warrior? Behold this rare wisdom is better merchandise than gold. It is true that recently I have planned to interpret this book because of its few commentators. However, the vicissitudes of these days have discouraged me. I could not do it alone. So too, my commentary on scripture and other writings on which I have worked have not given me leisure."

He jestingly tells Saul that of all the difficult



matters in the first part of the Guide he chose the simplest. Some of his answers are very lengthy and others short, wherein he generously admits his inability to be of help. The following is a typical example of his method and wit. "Let me inform you that here I have neither the treatise on 'The Possibility of Conjunction' (Efshorut ha-debekut) by Averroes, nor Narboni's commentary thereon. I therefore cannot explain the question you raise. If it were the Tosefoth or Codes I could borrow the necessary books from one of the local scholars but in matters of philosophy there is no possibility (efshorut) nor union (debekut). Perhaps the philosopher (Averroes) had reference to the process of reasoning and speculation, when he said that the existence of reason in us is due to two things: nature, the innate understanding and its normal, gradual refinement; and secondly, free choice, the effort which the thinker spends in comprehension. But this opinion of mine is that of a blind man groping in the darkness and you must forgive me."

This letter to Saul Hacoen was the last literary effort of our saintly hero. His tired body had reached the point of exhaustion. Death was hastened by the flare-up of war of Germany and France against Venice with its threat to the haven which the Jews thought they had found in that happy republic. Don Isaac died in the summer of 1508 in Venice at the age of 71, and was buried in the old cemetery at Padua. Five days later the rabbi of Padua,

Judah Minz, was buried by his side. But in death as in life, there was no rest for Don Isaac. In the fighting that took place the following year between the Venetian republic and the army of Emperor Maximilian the Second of Germany, the cemetery was destroyed and the precious remains scattered. Though his earthly frame was thus destined to oblivion, his name in history is firmly established. As in life his afflicted body could not stifle his glorious faith and vision of a redeemed and perfected mankind, so in death do his pious soul and spiritual accomplishments shine ever bright. This is the immortality that his comrade and philosopher-son invokes for him.

“He will live an age eternal,  
He will live forever,  
His name will shine above all,  
As the crown on the royal head.”

Judah edited his father's works and prepared them for the printer. In filial piety he composed poems prefatory to many of his father's books. In these he exalts the character of his father and the high merit of his writings. In the poem on the Rosh Amanah he calls his father the foremost teacher and the glory of the generation. In medieval fashion he played on his name Abravanel, reading it barben-el, the son of the son of God, when speaking of his father. In the poem to his father's commentary on the Ethics of the Fathers, Judah rhapsodizes:

“Isaac ben Judah, son of God’s son (bar-ben-el),  
Light of all eyes,  
Chief of all the sons of Eber,  
God vested him with learning,  
Power and ancestral virtue.

Light of the west, that shone out of Spain,  
The living God placed in his heart,  
The foundation of wisdom,  
The secret of creation and of eternity.”

He appreciates in his father’s commentaries their fine diction and wisdom, and he glories in his straightforward views, “without perhaps or if” and in his stand against falsehood and treachery. The poem introducing the commentary on the Later Prophets is the lengthiest of these. After alluding to the Davidic ancestry of Don Isaac, the son eulogizes him thus:

“Wisdom and wealth crowned Isaac’s forbears,  
His were charity, saintliness and integrity.  
Reverently they approached the light of his face,  
The wise, silent in his presence.  
Like the gazelle to hear him they hastened,  
They waited as for the rain on his words;  
Gently they dropped like dew on the grass.  
Their mouths gaped for the honey of his tongue,  
The wise hungered for his sweet palate.  
To his people he was strength and shield,  
Rescuing the oppressed from their foes.  
He stood firm and repaired the breaches,

And saved the Jews from the lions.  
Great in counsel, high in service and honor  
His heart was as big as the shore of the sea.  
Officers and kings sought daily his advice,  
In all knowledge, wisdom and understanding.  
His mind pondered all the while,  
O'er events of the day, royal business.  
And if his own troubles harassed him,  
Nothing hindered him from daily study.  
Without wavering, his heart communed  
With his God...."





*PART II*

THE SCHOLAR



## PART II

### THE SCHOLAR

#### 1

**A**BRAVANEL sets out with the firm mind of blazing a new trail in the art of bible study. The old commentaries did not satisfy him. Abraham Ibn Ezra and Nahmani are too cryptic. Instead of clearing up bible difficulties they add to them and mystify the reader. Gersonides sought too much to obtain a moral lesson or ethical maxim from each bible story. Brevity may be the spice of wit but not for Abravanel. He does not believe that a commentary should be too brief and abrupt like Rashi's which he considered inadequate. Neither does he care especially for David Kimhi's work because it is confined mainly to questions of grammar. In his opinion the grammatical treatment of the sacred text had been overdone. He feels certain that he has achieved the ideal type of commentary in style and method. As for content he does not pretend to be altogether original, to rely entirely on his own intuitions; but as he frankly says, "I will follow the reapers and gather up the sheaves; their good views, I



will accept; their bad ones, I will reject." There is much modesty in this statement. As a matter of fact he often makes very ingenious and novel comments, takes a bold stand toward the text, and is quite outspoken for praise or blame toward its interpreters.

Aside from the actual ideas he expresses, the framework or structure of his commentaries and the general method he uses strike us as an innovation. In all but one instance he begins his discussion of a book with a preface covering its purpose, scope, and certain of its stylistic and historical features. Then he proposes a series of questions ranging from six to as many as a hundred (as in his commentary on the Passover hagada). These questions are meant to stir the student's interest and to lead to an exhaustive survey of the matter under inquiry. He is not interested only in isolated words or ideas, but in entire sections and events. His commentaries therefore have a literary unity of their own. In explaining a passage, an event, or an institution, his treatment will be as complete and as rounded as possible, giving many points of view and citing on one subject any number of interpreters beginning with the talmud and midrashim and continuing with Saadia, Rashi, Nahmani, Levi ben Gerson, Ibn Ezra, Rabbi Nissim and others, and quite frequently giving also the notions of Christian and Arab theologians. Abravanel knew and reckoned with the history of interpretation.

It is best to think of his bible writings as lec-

tures delivered publicly in the synagogue on the Sabbath or before select study groups. He was not a rabbi, a paid preacher, or official of the community who spoke as a duty. These lectures were a labor of love. Together with very wide and thorough knowledge he showed the lecturer's alertness to current life and illustrated his points by reference to the political and social life of the people, as in the case of the medicinal balm, the mesta and the Venetian governmental system. The wealth of information he used in his discourses and his sparkling wit made him a ready and popular lecturer. There is nothing formal or dry in his point of view or presentation. On the contrary he bubbles over with ideas. His enthusiasm is infectious. His cleverness as interpreter appears in the unusual stress he placed on a phrase or the puns he made on certain words. *Lo taale b'maalot al mizbehi*, literally means, "Thou shalt not go up by steps unto Mine altar," but the word *maalot* (steps) also means excellences. Abravanel taking the latter sense interprets the verse, "Thou shalt not decorate with artificial excellences Mine altar, but build it in simple style." A hint at the ostentation of the Spaniard. *Naase v'nishma*, we will do and hear, which is logically in reverse order, is thus explained, we are ready to hear and receive more laws.

Of interest is his play upon the meaning of the names of the various bible characters. Occasionally Abravanel even forgoes biblical etymology in his

eagerness to display his cleverness. The bible derives the name Eve from the root to live, since she was the mother of all the living. He, however, traces the word to another root meaning to speak, and Eve was so called because woman is talkative. The bible refers to Deborah as the wife of Lapidoth; but our author translates her husband's name literally, torches, and makes scripture describe her as the ardent woman whose zeal for her people was fiery. Incidentally, in speaking of Deborah, the woman hero who led armies to victory and who meted out justice to her cohorts, Abravanel in true Spanish-Oriental frame of mind explains that the reason why Deborah held court beneath the palm-tree in the open was to avoid gossip. Abravanel traces the Christian institution of the convent to the consecrated seclusion of Jephthah's daughter.

He had an analytic mind and in argument showed great self-confidence. He seemed able to draw the subtlest distinctions, to find unexpected flaws in the views of others and to provide answers for every difficulty. He always had the last word. Unlike Rashi, he would not admit, "I do not know." His writings were a blend of several kinds in order to satisfy the very orthodox and at the same time attract the sophisticated. In the final analysis he leans toward traditional views but the tools he uses were such as to interest the progressive elements. We find very frequent reference to Aristotle's "De sensu" and to Christian and Arabic scholars.



That he was more than a piecemeal interpreter like Rashi, Ibn Ezra and others, but an essayist and one who thought out his problems as organic wholes, appears from his long drawn out treatment of phases of theology, and his many digressions on such themes as bible authorship, dreams, astrology, Hebrew poetry and variations in the text. Don Isaac's discussions are most novel. Their type makes its first appearance with him. Done on a large scale, being perhaps the bulkiest commentaries by any Jewish scholar, they seem at times actually to bulge out, to be overweighted with information; not that his many works are wordy or repetitious but that he has laid plans for a large edifice and has built on a deep and broad foundation. So many aspects of bible study entered into his commentary that it had to reach its colossal size.

Quite important among the purposes served by his commentaries was the desire to build up around the Jew a wall of thought, of true beliefs. He wanted to offset the harmful effect on Jewish morale of oppression and secularism, and so he paid considerable attention to the doctrines and precepts. He weighed and reaffirmed them time and again. He was living at a time when the strong tide of anticlerical and anti-doctrinal feelings ran high and threatened to engulf the Church. Abrahavanel feared that the same fate might come over the Synagogue. And so he fought the Jewish free-



thinkers and stressed faith more than science and reason. In an age of physical and spiritual danger to his people he stood preeminent as their defender. In this role we see him not only as a scholar of wide erudition but as a preacher and a guide who purposed to make Judaism a powerful and positive factor in his people's life.

We shall deal first with his notions about the structure of holy writ. Its threefold division by Jewish tradition into Pentateuch, Prophets and Writings had been variously explained. There is for example the fanciful analogy by Efodi between its three parts and the three sections of the sanctuary. This does not please Abravanel. He rejects the Christian division into legal, historical, and sophistic. This last label, he says, does not truly describe the holy writings for they are not merely philosophy like the works of Aristotle, but divinely inspired. He inclines to the time sequence, namely that some books (Pentateuch) were written before the people's entrance into the holy land; another group (historical, prophetic, Davidic and Solomonic) was written in the holy land before the destruction; and a third group (Ezekiel, Esther, Ezra, Chronicles, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) originated in the era after the destruction. He is uncertain in which era to place the book of Job.

The question who wrote the various parts of the bible was of special concern to Abravanel since upon it Judaism stood or fell. As we might have



*Courtesy, FUNK & WAGNALL'S CO., publishers  
of The Jewish Encyclopedia.*

ISAAC ABRAVANEL  
*(Traditional Portrait)*



surmised already, the contents of the Five Books were delivered in their present form by God to Moses. The Ten Commandments and the laws that immediately follow them were revealed to him on Mount Sinai; the narrative facts that precede and follow the legislation were communicated to him in the tent of gathering. The laws were verbally dictated by God and the rest came to him through prophetic inspiration.

Deuteronomy gave Abravanel much worry. He questioned many scholars on its authorship and had sent a rough draft of his commentary on the book to learned friends to get their opinion on it. The question that bothered him was whether Moses wrote it of his own mind or from divine dictation. The difficulty arose from the words, "Moses took upon him to expound this law," which implies that the contents of this book originated with him. There is also the fact that this book is written in the first person, whereas the other four are in the third person. But Abravanel concludes that Moses received every word of it from the Almighty. The entire bible is a sacred text to be accepted literally yet capable of many interpretations within certain limits. We dare not reject the simple truth of any of its parts, even the supernatural and miraculous.

In the Mifalot Elohim he lists seventy-five miracles recounted in the bible. These are of two kinds: those done by the prophets on their own account, by their own urge, ability and merit, even though moti-



vated by the divine; and those ordered directly by God. Of the first are the acts of Elijah, Elisha, Samuel and Joshua. The second are those performed by Moses and the literary prophets. The distinction between the two types appears strikingly in the Mosaic miracles at the Red Sea and at Mount Sinai and the lesser spectacle at Mount Carmel and the experiences of Elijah. There is a decided difference in the manifestation.

Abravanel is more critical in dealing with the composition of the historical and prophetical books than he is with the Mosaic writings. Although the talmud tells us definitely who the authors of the various books were, he somewhat boldly claims the right to differ from it for the reason that it too has no uniform view about the authorship of the last eight verses of Deuteronomy, and of the book of Job. In his opinion Joshua did not write the book bearing his name; the phrase "until this day" and other passages indicate later composition. The author of the book was Samuel. He too, together with Nathan and Gad, wrote the book known as Samuel. Samuel wrote about one third of it. Each of these men wrote the events of his own times. It was Jeremiah who collected and arranged in book form the material written by them. The interpolated passages are from the pen of Jeremiah. The book of Samuel is thus a composite work.

Abravanel suggests an added function for the prophet, that of editing and evaluating the writ-

ings of earlier authorities, such as the archives of the kings, judges and scribes. These works are often written from a personal, prejudiced point of view, with an amount of falsehood and with unnecessary facts. It was the business of the prophets to sift this material, to separate the chaff from the wheat. Their prophetic quality is to be seen in their keen judgment in selecting the most essential and permanent elements.

Abravanel tries to justify in other ways the use of the label prophetic with reference to the four historical books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. First it has been established that the authors Samuel and Jeremiah were prophets; secondly, the books were written by the express order of God; and lastly, the writings contained the revelation of the divine will in history. They offer us a knowledge of ancient history, otherwise unavailable, and an insight into religious life and character. In particular in Joshua we have the fulfillment of the divine promises to the patriarchs and to Moses concerning the holy land. Judges shows us Israel's fortunes in the transition period under the judges. Although the material in the book of Samuel could have been made part of either Judges or Kings it was put into a separate book in order to glorify the position of Samuel as the ideal judge, as a prototype of the ideal king.

As to the fitness of the name Samuel for the book bearing his name, Abravanel wonders why it was

not called Saul or David since many of the stories are about them. He cites the difficulty that Jerome had in naming this book. "Perhaps for this reason Gieronymus, the scholar who translated the scripture for Christians, although he called the books of Joshua and Judges and the rest as the rabbis generally did, yet he did not call this book the book of Samuel, but called it Kings, because of the stories of Saul and David that are described in it. He divided the book into two parts. The first from the beginning of the book until the death of Saul. The second from there until the end. Both parts are called *reges* in his language, or Kings. Since he did not find another name to distinguish it from the book of Kings which follows, he called it as I have said *reges*, and the other he called by its real Hebrew name *melakim*. Now *reges* and *melakim* mean the same thing, except that one is Latin, the other Hebrew. This is only because Gieronymus felt that the object of both books is identical, namely to deal with the rulers of Israel." \* This certainly shows that the name Samuel is inaccurate. His answer is that the Saul and David affairs are given in relation to and as part of Samuel's ministry. They were both anointed by him and he could be regarded as their teacher. Abravanel rates Samuel above David and therefore as one who deserved to be singled out. He had a more upright character. Saintliness and

\* In the Vulgate 1 and 2 Samuel are called I and II Regum; and 1 and 2 Kings, III and IV Regum.



piety characterized him to a greater degree than David. Samuel was conceived and born in purity, having come into the world in answer to a religious vow. He served God from childhood and shared also a prophetic ministry approaching the type of Moses and Aaron. Not so David; he lacked prophetic power; his inspiration was that of the holy spirit. In fact although Abravanel boasts of his Davidic descent and praises the mission of the dynasty, he looks at David with a critical eye. His premature old age was due among other things to the wild oats he had sowed in youth. David may have suffered from the plague. The growing tension and division in Europe between the pope and the kings, between spiritual and political leadership, may have helped Abravanel see the difference between the ministries of Samuel and David.

Abravanel raises the pertinent question why the writings of the prophets and those ascribed to David and Solomon were not made part of the books of Kings and Samuel, where their lives are recorded. This would be a logical arrangement. He answers that such a plan would make the historical books too heterogeneous and too difficult to master. Besides, the prophecies are a distinct branch of literature and should appear separately.

The commentator's account of Chronicles agrees with much in modern scholarship. Why is it not included like Kings in the second or prophetic section of the bible? Obviously because its author Ezra was



not a prophet. He confesses that he had never read the book until he began his commentary on it and found none available to help him except one by Kimhi that was entirely too brief. Ezra was the author of Chronicles, as well as of Ezra and Nehemiah. The proof of this is that the opening verses of Ezra are an accurate copy of the closing sentences of Chronicles. These books were therefore meant to be a continuous history. The purpose of Ezra the scribe was political propaganda, to exalt David, his family, his power and his dynasty, and to show the possibility of preserving the Jewish state after the return from Babylon. Abravanel divides Chronicles into three sections. The first deals with the history prior to David. He explains the omission of certain parts, such as the stories of creation, of the patriarchs and of the exodus by the fact that the author was concerned only with matters that led up directly to David. The second section centers around David's career, and the third deals with the history of his successors, the Judean rulers, to inspire the people with hope in the survival of the Davidic dynasty and the state. On the other hand Ezra censored many stories in Samuel that are not complimentary to David, for example, the one about Bathsheba and Uriah, and omitted them from Chronicles.

The book of Ruth was not made part of Judges, nor does it follow it as in the Christian bible, because its history is not of national interest but is a private and personal story. It was written by

Samuel at the time he anointed King David the new ruler, to show his glorious genealogy. The reader will recall that David is recorded as the great grandson of Ruth and Boaz.

Foremost among the literary prophets stands Isaiah. Instead of placing him after Jeremiah and Ezekiel as the talmud does, Abravanel put him first. He draws especially many contrasts between Isaiah and Jeremiah. The former preceded in time and excelled in character, ability and literary merit. He was of royal origin and had a superior education, apparent in his refined, artistic literary style. The very medium by which his divine messages reached him was clearer, more direct than with other prophets. Hence, his visions did not come in dreams or as mysteries that puzzled the hearer. The content of his prophecies, brimful of messages of hope and comfort, set him apart in a unique way from Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In addition to Israel's national restoration he holds up before our eyes the glorious purpose and crowning event of individual life, the ideal of a resurrected life. So learned and brilliant was the messianic character of Abravanel's commentary on Isaiah that the pope banned its reading by Christians. The historical or narrative portions in Isaiah (repeated also in Kings) are not entirely out of place. They too have an inspirational value.

The same reason is given by Abravanel to explain the historical portions in Jeremiah. The last

chapter, fifty-two, came from the pen of Ezra or the men of the Great Synagogue, who copied it from Kings in order to show that Jeremiah's words came true, and to connect it with the opening chapter of Ezekiel. Abravanel is not at all complimentary to Jeremiah. He thinks this prophet lacked the ability to express himself clearly and correctly. In a paragraph of some fine discriminating criticism prompted by the Renaissance emphasis on rhetoric and the art of expression, the critic describes three kinds of expressive ability: first, keen receptivity, the clearness with which facts or objects are imprinted upon the mind and retained by it; second, the capacity for vivid and eloquent oral expression; and third, the capacity for literary expression, including rhetoric, diction and grammar. There are many degrees of perfection attainable in one or more of these aptitudes ranging from the dullest person who is lacking in all of them to the prophetic genius. Jeremiah's faculty of perceiving impressions from without was splendid, but he was deficient in his ability to reproduce either by the spoken or written word the things that he saw or the inspired messages communicated to him. Hence his language is unclear, certainly not aesthetic, nor correct grammatically. In this way Abravanel accounts for the 81 cases of marginal readings (*keri* and *ketib*) in Jeremiah. They are due to his inadequate knowledge of Hebrew syntax.

Abravanel takes up the theory of certain scholars



(Kimhi and Efodi) that the *keri* and *ketib* resulted from ignorance of the exact form of the text during and after the Babylonian exile. The vanishing of the original text and the passing away of informed scholars brought doubt and conflicting opinions as to the exact wording of the text. They therefore held that Ezra adopted one form and placed the alternate form in the margin. Abravanel on the contrary held that Ezra had a well-written, authoritative copy of the torah but without vowels, punctuation or divisions. Ezra therefore met with great difficulty in making out the meaning of certain words. It was possible for a word to be read two ways and to have a double meaning. In that case he inserted one form in the margin to convey the mystic or homiletic meaning. When difficulty arose because of poor grammar or spelling or an unseemly expression, the correct form was placed in the margin. In Jeremiah all the variations are due to bad grammar. For the same reason the book of Samuel has 133 marginal readings since Jeremiah wrote it. Kings written by Jeremiah has 74. In contrast, the five Mosaic writings, four times the size of Jeremiah, have only 65 variants; Joshua and Judges written by Samuel have only 41, Psalms only 21, and Job, traditionally ascribed to Moses, 19. Ezekiel is another prophet who displayed poor style and worse grammar. His language is full of bad construction.

In Jewish philosophy the chariot vision in the



first chapter of Ezekiel is the locus classicus for theosophy and metaphysics. Abravanel gives and rejects two interpretations of this chapter. The mystics take the beasts and wheels to represent a hierarchy of angels. The rationalists headed by Maimonides divide the vision into three separate scenes which they take to depict the divine government of the whole world; the first scene, of the four beasts, symbolizing the four celestial substances; the second, of the four wheels, symbolizing the four elements; the last, the electrum, taken to be the system of separate intelligences. Abravanel stoutly refuses to approve these views on the ground that Ezekiel was not interested in theosophy but in the sad plight and fate of Israel. Common sense tells us that the prophet would not begin his ministry or his preaching with speculations about remote and abstract things. Neither the rationalistic procedure nor the mystical picture rings true. His own explanation is very ingenious. It is to be sure figurative, but figurative of what was happening to Israel. It prefigured also the history of mankind on earth. The prophet saw God in a setting that befitted Israel's situation, the ruin of their state and their exile to Babylon. This called forth a picture of God traveling in a wheeled chariot drawn by beasts, to accompany his people to their new home. The four beasts are a symbol of the four empires, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome that were to rule over Israel and upon

whom the ever-present God would bring judgment.

In his old age Abravanel rejoiced upon acquiring a copy of Ibn Ezra's all too brief commentary on the minor prophets. It had not circulated in Portugal. The key to the understanding of their prophecies, says Abravanel, is their uniform mood of hope and promise of Israel's restoration. Some idea of the way he expounds the minor prophets may be obtained from the topics or questions, by no means trivial, he proposes, such as the sequence in which they appear; the various terms used for prophecy; why chronological facts and such information as parentage and place of birth are given in some cases but not in others; why Nahum's prophecies only are called a book, *sefer*. The most important of these queries is why the minor prophets are counted as one book, which is not the case with the five Books of Moses or with the Five Scrolls. He explains that the Scrolls each treat of different and unrelated themes, and the Books of Moses, too, are each distinguishable by their contents, whereas the minor prophets have one common theme, one burden, the restoration. Another more practical reason why they were collected and preserved as a single work is because of their brevity which would have made it easy for the fragments to become lost. On the other hand the great bulk of the writings of the several major prophets made it necessary to separate them.

## 2

ABRAVANEL tells why the bible opens with the creation story, of universal import, rather than with the straight history of Israel. It is to impress upon us the truth that the world is God's not man's, and that therefore the divine apportionment of Palestine to Israel and the divine choice of Israel are legitimate claims. The placing of the creation story at the beginning of the bible supplies also an authentication of the divinely revealed Law.

A mooted question among many men in all ages has been: How true is the bible? What are the truths it wishes to teach us? Is it literal or symbolical? Abravanel took up the cudgels for the literalists. He constantly takes issue with Gersonides, Abraham ibn Ezra and their like for attempting to naturalize or rationalize the wonders and the appearance of the angels in the bible, such as the visit of the three persons to Abraham, the angel's intervention in the sacrifice of Isaac, Jacob's dream of the ladder and his wrestling with an angel. The issue involved in the interpretation of these episodes is the reliability of scripture as the word of God, as an authentic account of history and as a sanction of and guide to moral conduct. If liberties may be taken to twist the text out of its obvious meaning, then the whole edifice of religion topples to the ground. Abravanel frequently shames the Jewish skeptics by pointing to the firm faith of



Christians in the divine inspiration of the bible and the truth of the miracles.

To take the binding of Isaac as an example, the rationalizers view it as a dream or an hallucination; they contend that Maimonides laid down the principle that all events in which angels appear are to be treated as not objectively real. Abravanel retorts that it is possible that Maimonides regarded the speech or action of the angels as imaginary, but not so the part played by the human characters. This compromise had already been applied to the bible by earlier scholars. But it was difficult to accept. It meant the dividing of the episode into two parts, the one imaginary and the other actual. He suggests another way of treating the angelic episodes. If the angel is the central figure in the event, having the main speaking or acting part, the event is an imaginary one; if the man is the main figure with the angel subordinate or incidental then the event is real. As for the binding of Isaac, Abravanel defends Maimonides against the rationalist imputation that he disbelieved the story. Abravanel himself placed high significance upon it. It taught that reason was supreme over matter, which is the source of evil and whose other name is satan. In letting himself be offered up to God, Isaac divested himself of materiality and placed himself under the sway of pure reason. As such he became a glorious example to his people and to every man how human



life can be transfigured from selfish, earthly lowliness to the highest spiritual idealism.

Jacob's wrestling with the angel was a real physical fight and not a psychic experience. He did not agree with Maimonides that it was a prophetic vision, or with Gersonides' quite modern view that it was a dream induced by Jacob's emotional state of anxiety at the prospect of meeting his brother Esau. According to the latter view Jacob felt an imaginary pain in his thigh. Abravanel supposes that even if it were a vision or a dream it would be possible for Jacob to suffer a real injury to his thigh by the psychological principle that hysteria can induce certain organic changes. But Abravanel assumes that there was an actual contest in which an angel, the celestial protagonist of Esau, fouled the patriarch, hitting him below the belt. The blessing bestowed by the beaten angel upon Jacob when dawn was breaking was an admission of defeat. Abravanel sees an augury of the future in this event. The injury to Jacob's thigh portends the maltreatment of his descendants by the hostile race of Esau or Edom. But Israel will prove the victor. When the new day of Israel's redemption dawns, the nations will acknowledge his greatness.

In his preface to Exodus our expositor makes some interesting observations about the place of the patriarchs in Jewish history. Genesis deals mainly with individuals such as Adam, Abraham, Joseph and others. Exodus, on the other hand, treats of

the nation as a whole. The former tells of the patriarchs; the latter relates the elevation of the people to a spiritual community. He holds that the Hebrew people did not grow out of a conglomeration of primitive races, but represent a highly selected, pure race, that grew up by a process of exclusive breeding among certain families. In the course of its careful growth all inferior strains, *kelipot*, were eliminated. This racial point of view is used also to explain the growth of Judaism. It was handed down from father to son. Such growth by direct transmission instead of by expansion through its spread among peoples had many advantages. The ground is laid for genuine progress and perfection because children inherit the traits of parents and of their disciplined lives, and improve upon them. Descent from the same family makes room for and even demands the teaching and practice of love, charity and fraternity among the descendants. A religious evolution that proceeds along this line makes it possible that the fathers' merit will be an inspiration and a saving grace to their posterity. Again, in so far as the children of Israel, having come from one stock, have had a phenomenal increase in population we have proof of God's special interest in them. By this kind of reasoning, Abravanel insinuated that there was a bad side to the missionary policy of Christendom. The Church propagandized. It even forced conversion on the most diverse and unwilling peoples. As a result it is so heterogeneous that there is no possibility

for peace and accord within the Christian world. Judaism on the contrary discouraged proselytism. Its natural, normal growth explains the cohesion and fraternity of the Jews and its resistance to and purity from inferior cultures.

The blend of saintliness and practicality in Joseph appealed to Abravanel. Perhaps he saw himself, a loyal Jew and king's financier, in the same light as the bible hero. His own humanness made him pick out the intensely dramatic features of Joseph's life, and his comments are chockful of observations that will excite his listeners or readers. Thomas Mann in his novel, "Young Joseph," notices many things that are found in Abravanel. The latter wonders at the patriarch's long career. Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh; consequently he continued in his rule and rank eighty years without decline or disfavor at any time. "This is an amazing thing. I have not seen the like of it in the history of any of the kings of Rome, its princes, or officials or in the case of any other people." Opinions of this kind, homiletic bon mots and flashes of insight into the text, fill his treatment of the story of Joseph and his brothers.

Whatever the personal reason for his brothers' dislike of Joseph, Jacob loved him for his intellectual superiority. His dreams were real and portents of the future, although some of the brothers believed he did not dream them but made them up. Joseph did dream of sheaves of corn and upon his attaining



power in Egypt, they came and bowed down to him asking for corn to sustain themselves. Simeon and Levi were determined to slay him outright. It was Reuben who wanted to save him and suggested throwing him into the pit, believing that dreams are heaven-sent, and that Joseph would be saved by a miracle. Needing the coat for identification they could not say robbers slew him, for these would take the valuable coat. He was sold for as little as twenty shekels because it was not a matter of money but of disposing of him. Reuben's exclamation "The boy is not, and I, whither shall I go?" expresses his fear that his life was not then safe with his brothers. His father wept for him but not his brothers. "I will go down to the grave to my son mourning," contrary to the normal, that children visit the graves of parents.

Abravanel does not share the method of the allegorists who turn everything, the theophanies, visions, precepts, historical events and simple stories into symbols. The symbolists suggested the analogy between the twelve tribes and the twelve zodiac signs. The patriarchs are said to represent the upper spheres. The loss of a constellation, that of Joseph, upset the normal operation of the cosmos and the course of history.

Joseph's part in explaining Pharaoh's dream provides an opportunity for an excursus on dreams. Abravanel takes them and their interpretations seriously and cites Aristotle, Avicenna, Algazali, Maimonides, Gersonides and Narboni on the phe-



nomenon. He holds that the imagination, reverie, planetary influence and real experience are the sources of dreams and must be taken into account in interpreting them. The approach should be scientific, with definite rules and treatment. He suggests the physician's method of making a diagnosis of the patient on the basis of the symptoms of his disease and of his past history, his habits and occupations. So must the interpreter know the character and temperament of the dreamer as well as the meaning of the dream figures and symbols. The best interpreters like Joseph and Daniel draw also on the "holy spirit."

## 3

THE MAN who came nearest to realizing perfection was Moses, if indeed he did not achieve it completely at certain moments. To Abravanel as to other Jews he was the superman, the noblest specimen of humanity, one who was able to divest himself for the longest period of time of physical needs and to approach a spiritualized existence. He was the fittest intermediary between God and Israel. As the ideal man, Abravanel depicts Moses as not only spiritually great but also as superb physically. He was of great strength. At birth he showed vigor and stamina and retained a sound body all through life. He lived without nourishment on the mountain for forty days and when he passed away at the age of 120 years he

was still vigorous. With a robust body went moral character and an ideal temperament. His mind was so singularly developed that he had a consummate knowledge of the Godhead, of the universe and of human history. His grandest attainment was prophecy and in this acquisition, too, he excelled all others who laid claim to it. He was unique among the prophets in so far as he was continuously receptive to the divine message. It was not a case, as with the others, of waiting for inspiration, of preparing for a ripe occasion. He was always keyed up, always in a state of readiness. Unlike the other prophets, he prophesied not with metaphors and visions, but directly and plainly so that his meaning was never puzzling or ambiguous. His message came straight from God and not from the Active Reason; moreover, it was received by the medium of his reason and not of his imagination. For all of these reasons, Moses was in a class by himself, first in time in the line of prophets and first also in the degree of perfection. Thus exalted, he played his part in the formative period of his people's history, as their holy deliverer from slavery, their ruler in the desert and their supreme judge. It appears that one of Abravanel's main purposes in presenting Moses as a superman at great length was to counterbalance the deification of Jesus by the Church.

Abravanel is also aware of the existence of the Moses of legend, the one whom folklore, for example, describes as living in Kush. Such stories might be

true, but scripture omits them as not representing his real career and mission.

The hiding of the new-born child in the reed box, "tebat gomë," in the river is not out of the ordinary. "For," says Abravanel, "I have seen written that in many southern and tropic lands, it is the custom to bring up infants so, that is, to place them up to their necks in a pile of earth, 'gumat afar' so that the heat of the air should not harm them." The name Moses is Hebrew and was given him by his mother, and is not, as Ibn Ezra proposed, a translation from an Egyptian name. None of the proper names occurring in the bible is a translation from a foreign tongue.

Abravanel is quite certain that an actual angel appeared in Moses' first experience with God in the vision of the burning bush. Maimonides had said that no angel was in or about the tree but that the fire in it was what is meant by angel. The point of the whole story is that the distressed Moses had pondered over the sufferings of Israel and had sought to explain them in a usual way as the result of natural or political forces and conditions. But the divine order, "remove thy shoes," meant that he surrender the common, pedestrian attitude. He should realize that history is divine and that Israel is under God's providential care. The interpretation of human affairs is not by natural law. Thus informed, Moses became the ambassador of God to Pharaoh. When Moses said, "Who am I to go?" it was not in protest, but the kind of rhetorical question that others, too,



like Abraham and Jeremiah had uttered. It implied the humbleness and insignificance of the messenger compared to God whose power alone can bring salvation.

Moses' pastoral life in Midian, brief though it was, prepared him temperamentally and spiritually for his life-work. The luxurious Egyptian palace was an altogether unfit place to make a prophet out of him, but as a lowly, faithful shepherd he gained the needed qualities. He served Jethro carefully anxious to conserve his interests as though they were his own. Was Abravanel speaking out of his experience as minister to the kings? Family co-operation in business and the employment of relatives are urged by Abravanel. Moses showed good sense in seeking to enter the service of the influential Jethro. It is right to work for a relative, especially for a wealthy one, for the opportunity and aid it gives the worker and for the added protection and care that the employer receives.

Before Moses visits Pharaoh he must be sure of his ground. He must have certain sanctions and assurances. First as to the name of God. In whose name will he demand the liberation of the Hebrews? Abravanel with good judgment disputes the rationalist interpretation of the divine name, *ehye asher ehye*. The oppressed Israelites were not worried about philosophy or about the universe but about the chance of being let out of Egypt. They wanted to know then by whose authority Moses challenged



Pharaoh. Who sponsored his mission? Did he come in the name of demons, the stars, angels or an almighty, everlasting God?

As time went on the people became less and less hopeful of the possibility of gaining their liberty because of the ceaseless cruelty of Pharaoh, the hate of the Egyptian people and their own despairing, defeatist attitude. Hence, the three wonders to convince the people, not Moses, of God's readiness to help them. The staff that turned into a serpent was a symbol of Egypt. Moses was not to fear the serpent, but seize it for it was only a staff, a rotting, fragile piece of wood. In the second wonder, Israel is the hand, Palestine is the bosom. Outside of Palestine Israel becomes tainted and perverse. It is the task of Moses to bring Israel to Palestine and to win it over to the Law. The third wonder, pouring the water of the Nile river on dry land and its turning into blood, portended the death of the Egyptians in the Red Sea.

And so the majestic Moses proceeded with the staff in his hand to make his demand upon Pharaoh. The staff betokened many things, support and courage, lordship, unity, defiance to the enemy, a correct guide to the stranded and a symbol of righteousness. The meeting of Moses and Pharaoh was more than a contest between two determined and powerful leaders. Moses' command that the Hebrews go free was predicated on the principle of God's existence, His providence over mankind and His pro-

tection of Israel. Hence it was a war for supremacy between two philosophies, one based on the elemental and brutal forces of nature, and the other on a belief in the God of justice and mercy.

To persuade Pharaoh and his people Moses offered his proofs or signs of God's interest in Israel.\* The destructive signs or plagues appeared to the magicians of Egypt very much like their own kind of work. They believed that Moses had invoked the demons against them and they too tried to bring down their evil influence upon the earth. The fact that the signs changed rapidly made Pharaoh feel that they were tricks played upon him. The decisive plague, the death of the first-born, is connected by Abravanel, as by many modern scholars, with Egyptian mythological worship. The lamb was the most revered, the first-born of all signs of the zodiac, the guardian-angel. Hence too the Passover celebration began with the lamb sacrifice on the fourteenth of Nisan.

Abravanel omits the historical significance of the festival and points to its moral values. The seven day holiday is a reminder of the transiency of man's life. Some of its rules puzzle him. "As for the prohibition of leavened bread, would that I understood it and its connection with the redemption from Egypt, and why the duty of eating the Passover

\* *ot*, sign, not supernatural but a sign of God's favor like the rainbow, phylacteries, etc.; *mojet*, demonstration, proof; *nes*, outstanding wonder, miracle; *peleh*, vision.

lamb and unleavened bread was for one night and the prohibition of leavened bread for seven days. And why people were ordered to abstain from work on the first and last day and not on the others." In spite of this he does offer explanations. The prohibition of eating leavened bread symbolizes the removal of evil from our nature. The four wine cups represent the four periods of life, childhood, adolescence, middle age and decline. The ceasing from material work on the first and last day means that we should consecrate the two extreme periods in our lives. In childhood there should be training in morality and faith. Old age, too, should be completely devoted to spiritual aims and tasks.

The long recognized difficulty why Pharaoh was punished if God hardened his heart receives several answers. The hardening of the heart did not come in the first instance from God but from the wonders that had the effect of making him resentful toward Israel. There is a sense in which even God cannot relent from causing punishment to fall upon the wrong-doer. And Abravanel draws the line between crime and sin. God can forgive one who sins against Him, but no mercy can be shown toward one who wrongs his fellow-man. Thus repentance can never wipe out the penalty due the thief or murderer. In his abuse of Israel, Pharaoh was guilty of an atrocious crime against humanity. The hardening of the heart, therefore, means that by the inexorable law of compensation he could not escape the con-



sequences of his cruel conduct. In common with other theologians and philosophers Abravanel fails to solve the problem of the conflict between human free-will and predetermination.

Abravanel devotes considerable space to a study of the theory and practice of the sacrificial system. After discussing every aspect of the sacrifices, such as the kinds, purposes and ritual, he takes up the big debatable question on which the two theologians Maimonides and Nahmani held opposing theories, namely, the question of the origin and rationality of the cult. Abravanel sides with Maimonides in his rational explanation of it against the objections raised by Nahmani. According to the former it was originally a heathen practice to which the mass of the Hebrews was addicted, and the object of the Mosaic law was to give it a higher sanction, to divert it to the service of God, and eventually to wean the people away from it. He cites support for Maimonides from the prophets who belittled it and from the talmud. Although Abravanel frowns upon the mystical reasons for the institution, he himself reads the idea of immortality into the *olah*, the burnt-offering, and providence and reward and punishment into the *hataat* and *shelamim* (sin and peace offerings).

Several significant events took place before the crowning act on Mount Sinai. First, the manna. Abravanel refutes all efforts to identify it with a natural or medicinal balm, known by the same or a different name in Italy or the Orient. This rational



view seemed to be confirmed by Maimonides' opinion that miracles cannot last for a long or continuous period. Since the manna fell for forty years it could not be unnatural or miraculous. To this Abravanel replies that the miracle of the manna ended daily. Each day's fall was a fresh wonder. The argument that in some respects the manna resembled the healing balm does not convince Abravanel. Similarity is not identity. He cites Ibn Ezra's reasons showing that the two were not the same product. If it were a natural product it would be found now in the Sinaitic desert, which is not the case. He does not concede that nature may have changed since olden days. The medicinal balm falls only in spring. He himself saw it in Apulia, the Kingdom of Naples, whereas the manna appeared throughout the year. The medicinal kind does not melt when exposed to the sun; it dries up at night; it melts in the mouth. It was the reverse with the biblical manna. The latter was a wholesome, generally useful and nourishing food, whereas the medicinal was for a special purpose.

Abravanel sees implied in the words, "Gather each one as much as he will eat," the socialistic principle of economic equality. No person was allowed to have more than he needed for actual daily consumption. He believes that Moses wanted to prevent speculation in and hoarding of food, to avoid the accumulation of wealth and the inequalities between rich and poor. Considering that he was living

in a feudal society, Abravanel announced a bold opinion. But other voices too were heard in this century in protest at the concentration of wealth. One prominent churchman, Antonius of Florence, in a book on this question said, "Although private property is of the natural law, the State can control the possessions of the rich." \*

In the clash between Israel and various desert races the only enemy that called down upon itself an eternal curse was Amalek because Amalek more than any other deserved such condemnation for its military tactics. Abravanel conceives the eternal feud between the two peoples as due to an unjustified, unpardonably cruel and cowardly war waged by Amalek against Israel. It gave no warning of war. It fought not with the main forces, but with the defenseless, with the aged and the sick who straggled behind the army.

In describing the judicial system proposed by Jethro, Abravanel draws an analogy between it and the administration in Venice. He believes in the division of courts into criminal and civil, and their further grouping into higher and lesser courts depending on the seriousness of the offense or the amount of money involved in the case. The meaning of officers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens, would then be different courts trying cases in which those several sums of money were involved. The numbers might also refer to the size of the various courts

\* De Wulf, *History of Medieval Philosophy*, II, p. 229.

and legislatures. For example, Venice had a Great Council (the lower house) of a thousand, a Pregadi (senate or upper house) of two hundred, the Quarantis of forty judges, and the Consiglio de' Dieci or Council of Ten.

The judges should be men of the highest integrity and courage for it is so easy for them to be misled. They must not refuse to listen patiently to both litigants; they should not permit any compromise after the case had been submitted and heard. They should not be improperly influenced by the appearance, manners, specious arguments, social or economic station of either side, nor be deterred from issuing an honest verdict from fear of revenge by the litigants.

### 3

THE WEIGHTIEST discussion is evoked by the great act of the Law's revelation at Sinai. To begin with, Abravanel views it as the supreme miracle of history, the combination for a special purpose of ordinary phenomena, such as thunder, lightning, cloud, rain, fire and the quaking mountain, with the trumpet sound and God's voice. The Law revealed at that time was a superb, heavenly law (torah), not mere legislation (dat) which is man-made. These two sources of truth, the philosophic and prophetic, are set at opposite poles. One is a human, the other is a divine philosophy. The former has some good and many



bad features. The most obvious of these is the conflict of opinion among philosophers, for example, the conflict between Aristotle and Plato or between Avicenna and Averroes. Then again, try as he will, man's researches cannot be exhaustive or reach final conclusions. Even usual, natural phenomena cannot always be explained. On the other hand prophetic knowledge is certain and final. The entire purpose of the Sinaitic revelation was to fix the phenomenon of prophecy indelibly in the consciousness of Israel and in the history of mankind; to show that prophetic truth issues from the divine mind; to impress upon men the supremacy of Moses and the eternity of the Law; to prepare the people for the institution of prophecy that was to flourish in Palestine and to instil reverence for God in the nation.

The Hebrews came to Mount Sinai on the first day of Sivan. On the morning of the second day, Moses went up the mountain. On the same day he descended and gave the people the arrangements for awaiting the Law. He went up again on the third day and received the Ten Commandments on the sixth day. On this same visit to Sinai he received the criminal and civil law found in Exodus 21-23 and committed them all to writing. All this took place on the sixth day.

As a result of this solitary communion with the Almighty on the mountain-top, Moses was completely transfigured. Henceforth he lived on a level of continuous prophetic and spiritual perfection. To



attain this exalted state he remained on the mountain for forty days. Medievalist that he was, Abravanel played with the number forty and arranged a program of study for Moses during his stay on the mountain. He set about to master metaphysics, to learn the deep mysteries of the make-up and functions of the universe. In the first ten days he learned of the ten species of physical existence; in the second ten days, he learned of the ten heavenly substances; in the third, of the separate intelligences; and in the fourth, of the emanation of the world from the eternal One. Abravanel suggests also a period of moral development in Moses in addition to the intellectual growth just mentioned. The forty days' communion enabled him to suppress each of the four physical elements or humors innate in him as a human being by the refining and spiritualizing power of the Ten Commandments. Each physical element then required ten commands, or one command a day, to conquer it.

This literal acceptance of what happened on Sinai clashed with the rationalists and skeptics who took the entire experience as symbolic and denied that the law was given by God. What is meant by revelation, they said, is philosophy, and they interpret the language describing the revelation at Sinai allegorically. "Thick cloud," is materialistic speculation, "ready in three days," means the three sciences, logic, natural science and metaphysics; "wash your clothes," is the improvement of morals; "Mount Sinai," is

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reason; "limit the people," means to keep man's search within limits because of his finite capacity; "when the trumpet is blown," means that the metaphysical scholar must have reached his fiftieth year, (the jubilee of his life). This method of interpreting the bible is a travesty of God's word and downright heresy in Abravanel's view and he charges Narboni and others with falsely imputing such ideas to Maimonides. Abravanel is amazed at one of his contemporaries, Isaac Arama, who argued that Maimonides denied revelation of the Law (torah min hashamayim). Certainly the refugees from Egypt were not troubled by philosophic speculations. With a fine and deep insight Abravanel raises the moral question whether submission to the torah is freedom or servitude. The fact of its divine origin makes its authority exterior to man, thereby depriving him of autonomous morality and of freedom. He resolves this difficulty by pointing out that the torah is as fundamental as truth and that therefore its teachings are compelling ethically, and that obedience to it brings man to perfection, thereby gaining for him his highest and most real freedom.

The people perceived the events taking place on Sinai with their senses; they heard and understood the Ten Commandments uttered articulately by a voice created for the occasion. This differs from the Maimonean view. Maimonides had laid himself open to criticism on this point. He held that the Ten Commandments were addressed to Moses only and

that the people standing at Sinai heard only an inarticulate voice. The use of personal address to Moses would at first glance tend to prove that they were delivered to him alone. The language of Moses, "I stood between the Lord and you," supports the argument that the lawgiver alone heard God. Then too there is the verse, "Moses spoke and God answered him by a voice." All this would tend to show that the revelation was not public, but private and might have been the result of the spiritual communion between Moses and the Almighty. But Abravanel, as so often, attempts to refute his opponent's views by prolix arguments and fine distinctions coming to the traditional conclusion that the people at large rose to the level of inspiration and understanding to receive His commands directly from God. On the other hand Maimonides' views on revelation and prophecy would of course exclude the possibility of large masses of people achieving such an intellectual experience.

As elsewhere in his commentary, Abravanel here also in the interpretation of the Commandments uses the method of *peshat*, i.e., the ordinary sense of the passage; he does not allegorize or substitute remote meanings for simple phrases. He expresses his chagrin over the effort of Ibn Ezra to find a correspondence between the Ten Commandments and the ten planets or ten spheres. It must be noted however that although Ibn Ezra was an astrologer he was otherwise a most rationalistic



writer. Abravanel in discussing the Ten Commandments employs his usual method of phrasing questions as an approach to the subject. Here however he shows unusual penetration and insight in the relevancy and pointedness of some of the questions which he raises. He is concerned, for example, with the problems why the first command, "I am the Lord thy God," is not in imperative form as are the others; why God does not give a stronger, more fundamental reason for belief in His existence, that as creator of the world, instead of basing it on an historical event; why the Ten Commandments deal with axiomatic and ordinary truths instead of metaphysical principles. Happily, Abravanel's answers are as pointed as his questions. To answer the last first, the philosophic principles were omitted because these do not bring genuine and ultimate happiness, nor do they lead to sincerest devotion to God. "Grant that all Jews would be philosophers, what would they gain thereby?" Philosophy blows hot and cold. Although it admits God's existence, unity and incorporeality, it rejects other fundamentals such as His power to alter nature, providence and reward and punishment. This is how Abravanel brands the philosophers as a class: "they are snakes, vipers who cast their poison into the torah and gnaw at its stories and laws."

The question why God's existence is not linked with the world's creation in the first command is



cleverly answered. It was felt that psychologically the fact that God freed the Hebrews from slavery would appeal more strongly to the people than a cosmic truth. Moreover, the former act was one of which they had direct knowledge and experience; the creation was a remote event and its possibility might even be doubted. The point raised about the form of the God command that it is an affirmation and not an imperative and is therefore not really a commandment or even a precept as Crescas and others held, receives considerable discussion. Abravanel maintains that we have here not ten precepts, nor ten themes but ten utterances distinguished from one another only by the fact that there was a pause after each utterance. These ten utterances correspond to what we traditionally take to be the Ten Commandments. Hence although the words, "I am the Lord thy God, Who brought thee out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage," are not an imperative, they form the first of the series of divine utterances. We are to look then for utterances, not commands. This view is borne out by the Hebrew name for the decalogue, *aseret hadibrot*, the Ten Words.

The commandment not to make any image or likeness of the Deity was necessary since the people had been told not to forget what had happened at Sinai. It was feared that to help their memory they might draw pictures of what they saw, such as God and Moses in the clouds above the mountain,

and thus be led to anthropomorphic worship. Abravanel was thinking of the mythology of Greece and Rome and of the religious paintings of the Italian renaissance artists who portrayed celestial and earthly scenes with male and female figures, children, angels and animals, inspired by scriptural stories.

The command to honor father and mother calls for more than the usual parental respect. We are to honor them by preserving the traditions concerning God and Judaism entrusted to them and which they are duty-bound to hand down. Abravanel's concern is for religion authenticated by reliable evidence. In this we see again his anxiety to preserve Judaism in an age of intellectual disintegration.

The Sabbath is a day of rest because God rested thereon, and not for any special quality the day has or astronomical connection with Saturn. The clause "Six days shalt thou work" is added advisedly, because astrologers regarded some days as unlucky on which they abstained from work. The *only* day of rest is the Sabbath. Abravanel here takes his stand against private superstitions rejected by the Synagogue.

In his discussion of the sixth commandment, as of the others, Abravanel reads a deeper ethical significance into the words than their bare language would imply. "Thou shalt not kill" binds us to live unselfish, benevolent lives, for he who withholds charity may be the means, however indirect, of the death of the poor and the destitute.

The affirmative implication of the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," is the command to practice social justice. Abravanel in quite modern fashion recognizes that the economic fabric of society is bound up with the question of the value of money. The Church, in common with the Synagogue, forbade interest as unethical. However, ethical ideas change with time and conditions and no one would now consider interest from the same standpoint. In olden times religion was so opposed to the whole idea that interest, no matter how small, was called usury. Thus we find the scriptural injunction not to take usury from one's brother. Non-Jews have pointed out that the Israelite was permitted to take usury from the stranger and have inferred a lower ethical standard in Judaism from this discrimination. Our author shows, however, that the law permitting usury from strangers never included monotheists, so that the attitude toward Christians and Mohammedans in this regard, at any rate, was the same as that toward the Jew. He shows a fine sociological understanding in his recognition that for social intercourse between Israelite and Canaanite such law was unavoidable. The seven nations among whom the Israelites of old lived dealt with their fellow-men by certain standards, and for sheer self-protection the Israelites occasionally found it necessary temporarily to adopt some of those standards. Otherwise life would have been impos-



sible. So that the Christian argument that the Jewish law in conditionally permitting interest is imperfect and not on the highest ethical level, is unreal and misleading.

Abravanel, like other commentators, believed that the Ten Commandments, so brief, even abrupt, subsume the *taryag* or six hundred and thirteen precepts of the canon. He also feels certain that Maimonides' thirteen principles are contained in the decalogue. With admirable ingenuity, furthermore, he proceeds to read into the Ten Commandments the wide range of specific laws found in the three chapters that follow them in the book of Exodus and which are illustrations of them. He classified these laws into three groups: *edot*, testimonies to God, ritualistic regulations concerning the Sabbath, festivals and the like; *hukim*, laws which are humanly speaking irrational, but divine fiat; and *mishpatim*, the civil laws which differ from man-made legislation only in their divine origin. But this difference has consequences of the utmost importance. The divine stamp impresses upon the biblical law a high moral sensitiveness.

The supplementary code which follows the Ten Commandments opens with the law of slavery and freedom even as the decalogue opens with an awe to God, the liberator of the enslaved. In an age of cruelty the Hebrew law freed the slave who was injured by his master. The penalty compelling the



seducer of a virgin to marry her was one to fit the crime, for usually a man seduced a girl who was beneath him in social station and whom he would not otherwise marry. The law imposing the death penalty on the witch follows the law on seduction because the witch has from time immemorial been closely connected with the oldest profession. The law to cast to the dogs the flesh found in the fields suggests to Abravanel that the dogs used in hunting may have caused the death of the bird or animal; in which case let canines rather than humans eat it.

Abravanel explains some of the dietary laws as motivated by a merciful attitude toward animals, such as the prohibitions not to boil a kid in its mother's milk and not to slaughter the parent animal and its offspring on the same day. The law recognizes that such practices might breed callousness in man. The rabbinical law forbidding the using of meat and milk together is derived from the biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk." Abravanel interestingly discovers the origin of this ordinance in an old, heathen custom of the harvest festivals. The custom he believes to have survived in the semi-annual fairs of the mesta, the sheep owners' guild, held in Castile and in England. At these gatherings at which the shepherds make celebration and take counsel with one another for the improvement of their industry, they eat a preparation of goat's meat and milk. The origin of this custom may be sought in sympathetic magic to in-

crease the cattle's fertility. The biblical prohibition was intended to prevent the infiltration of heathen customs into the Jewish agricultural feasts.

Abravanel cites with disapproval the Maimonean reason that a diet of meat and milk together is unhealthful. He takes issue with the scholars who hold that certain animals, birds and fish are prohibited for reasons of physical well-being as likely to cause alimentary and other diseases. This view would make of the bible a compendium of health laws, another medical book. This, says Abravanel, is far from being the case. He points to the non-Jewish nations that eat the kinds of living things forbidden to Jews and yet they are healthy and thrive physically. His reason for the biblical prohibition is that these creatures are harmful to the spiritual growth and character of the individual. Forbidden foods affect the temperament, the moral nature and psychic life of man.

When Israel entered the promised land, they were led by Joshua; Moses had died in Transjordan. Abravanel wants to know why. His entrance into Canaan would have been the logical climax to a life of devotion to people and God. How he would have gloried to see the fulfillment of the divine promises to the patriarchs; to visit the site of the future temple; to perform the precepts obligatory in the holy land; to see his people live the full life depicted for them by Joshua and Caleb. Moses the man of God prayed fervently but God did

not hearken to his prayer; how can other mortal men hope for God's salvation? With all his love for them Moses had once sinned against his people and for an offense against Israel even a Moses could not be forgiven.

But before he died Moses saw from the top of Mount Nebo, which Abravanel interprets to mean the mountain of prophecy, all of Palestine, and in a prophetic vision he had a preview of all that was to happen to Israel in the holy land for centuries to come. The law-giver himself wrote the last verses of his death as something about to happen. The question is raised why Moses was not translated alive from earth to heaven as was Elijah. One would think that such a departure from this earth would be more befitting to Moses than burial. Our author finds however, that Moses' death, even as Elijah's, was miraculous in so far as it did not result from old age or sickness. Furthermore, Moses achieved at death the complete and ideal separation of body and soul. His soul unaffected by the taint of its connection with the body went to the realm of separate intelligence whereas Elijah's was encumbered by the corporeal frame. In this idealization of the great law-giver, Abravanel would even spare the physical remains of Moses from decay. In fact none was left in the earth, his body dissolved at the moment of death into its fundamental elements.

Our expositor mentions the Moslem veneration of the cave of Machpelah in Hebron in which the

Hebrew patriarchs are interred. The location of the tomb of Moses, however, was never known; Jews have revered Moses but they have never venerated his sepulcher or deified his person.





*PART III*

THE THINKER



### PART III

## THE THINKER

### 1

**I**T is impossible to draw a clear-cut line between the contents of the previous section and this one, for the reason that Don Isaac's bible discussions contain theology and his philosophic books are full of bible interpretation. As a bible scholar he was outstanding. From our modern point of view we feel that for his time and age there was something extraordinary, even sensational, in the technique with which he handled the text and in his findings. The same can not be said of his theology except possibly for his nice examination of Jewish beliefs. In his kit of tools he had the writings of Aristotle and of the standard Arab and Jewish thinkers which he had mastered in his youth. He uses them particularly in his inquiries into the definition of primary matter and primary form, the manner of the world's emanation from God, whether God, as a sphere, is the direct mover of the planets and whether philosophy or prophecy offers man the highest knowledge. Unlike the naïve talmudists he



did not taboo the study of fundamental philosophic problems and even cites the tolerance of the doctors of the talmud and of later sages who permitted the individual the right to investigate and interpret beliefs.

Some idea of his thorough and analytical method may be gained from his book *Mifalot Elohim*, the Works of God, on creation. Separate chapters weigh the pros and cons of the Mutakallimun views, of the Jewish harmonizers, of the Christian scholastics, and of Aristotle's commentators, Philipponus and Alexander Aphrodisias.

If Abravanel did not cap his literary career with a magnum opus on theology as other well known thinkers did, it was not because he lacked the ability or equipment, but because he was too much the man of affairs, engrossed in business and financial service, to compose a sustained and well-rounded philosophic system. Yet in his bible commentaries and brief philosophic studies there is enough to show us that he was thoroughly grounded in the vast ancient and medieval thought literature and that it was not as a dilettante that he broached its problems in his works. He knew Aristotle, most probably in Hebrew translation, with Averroes' commentary, though he did not revere him as the master, as did Maimonides. When in old age, his correspondent Saul Hacoen asked him to locate the Aristotelian principle that matter does not move itself, cited in the Guide, Abravanel replied that he had searched

the accessible Aristotelian books, referring to them by their Hebrew names, hamofet, higayon, hashema, hanefesh and ahar hateba, but had not found it. It might be, he added, in one of his other books.

Everywhere he displays a lively interest in the pursuit of theology. He analyzes, contradicts and defends; but, as in his bible commentaries, finally he stands for his own viewpoint. As in a game of nine-pins he laboriously sets up the opinions of others only to knock them down.

The fabric of his mind was orthodox, with some threads of mysticism. He himself disclaims any knowledge of, or leanings toward, the cabala. He was undoubtedly justified in saying "I have no interest in secret lore; I have not walked in the ways of the cabala, it is far from me." For the cabala in his time had become a separate and highly organized religious system. Yet he knew it and employed some of its vagaries in his writings. He could not indeed be classed as a professional or technical cabalist, and certainly did not believe in its magic aspect. At the same time, we should bear in mind that orthodoxy had been impregnated with certain mystical ideas which in time became part and parcel of it. After all, mysticism was nearer orthodoxy than rationalism. Its very name cabala, meaning tradition and transmission, gave it a sure entrée into the Jewish mind and school which rationalism could never expect. He apparently accepts the legend that in old age Maimonides met a man who opened up to him the

mysteries of the cabala and that he (Maimonides) said that were it not for his old age and the fame of his books he would retract his views and accept the new. Did Abravanel surmise that Maimonides came near to giving up his rationalism for mysticism?

Abravanel could not escape the hot dispute that for centuries alarmed the Jews and divided them into two warring camps over the issue of faith versus reason and over the right to study philosophy. The wide scope of his learning shows that some sort of adjustment had been reached permitting a man of his orthodox convictions to rummage through the storehouse of secularist literature and to absorb Greek ideas, provided these did not do too much damage to religious tradition.

He is fond of using the term faith, *emunah*, as the opposite of philosophy and as the truer one of the two. Faith to him is knowledge that comes by way of tradition, that is derived from prophetic or other supersensible channels, final and ultimate truth. Maimonides and the school of the harmonizers that followed him took the view that faith is truth perceived and demonstrated by reason. But to Abravanel faith comes through non-rational channels, even though it is not anti-rational. The bible teaches the things of faith. The intellectual fad of discovering a whole philosophic system in it does not appeal to him. The satisfaction that man gets from the exercise of his reason falls short of the fullest degree of happiness. Likewise the truest



and deepest knowledge does not come from study, be it ever so intensive, but from illumination reaching us by the medium of faith.

Abravanel finds in the candlestick of the sanctuary an allegorical allusion to worldly knowledge and its relation to prophetic truth. The seven lamps stand for the seven sciences in which Aaron the high priest was expert. These lamps are to be so lit as to give light in front of the candlestick before which stood the holy ark. This means that the sciences should shed light on the Law in the ark, harmonizing faith and reason. Carrying the allegory further, the pure and choice gold of the candlestick symbolizes the essential value of human wisdom. But its practical value is measured by the degree to which it illumines and fortifies religious beliefs of which Moses was the exponent. In this allegory, the brothers Aaron and Moses stand for human and divine philosophy respectively.

Standing firmly on the premise that revelation is always right, that it is the queen whose hand-maiden is philosophy, that philosophy has no existence of its own, but is real only in so far as it sustains and clarifies religion, Abravanel conducts a fierce polemic against the radical rationalists. His wit sees a parallel between the four types of religious thinkers and the four sons of the Passover hagada. He calls Averroes the wise son, Narboni the wicked, Hasdai Crescas the innocent, and with mock modesty styles himself the one who does not know what or how



to ask. He lashes the Jewish scholastics or rationalists with his sarcasm. Their starting point is not the authority and veracity of holy script, but their own positions. Among these heretics is the scientist Gersonides whom he censured for denying the actuality of miracles, particular providence, human free-will and the creation of the world out of nothing.

But the arch-heretic whom this zealot of orthodox tradition can least tolerate is Moses Narboni, "For Narboni is an intellectual barbarian, neither upright nor saintly, imputing to Maimonides false opinions and speaking against God and against Moses." Such berating streaks every chapter that Abravanel wrote. It shows the deep fear and agitation of pious men over the spread of what they considered irreligious ideas. Indeed Narboni does hold views strange to medieval thought. His radicalism is almost modern in its implications. He rejects many of the stories in Genesis as authentic history. He denies, for example, the existence of the man Adam. The stories of creation, the earthly paradise, the trees, the serpent, Adam and his sons are taken as allegories. The word, ha-adam, he held, could not mean a person because the definite article cannot be used with a proper name. "The man," then, symbolizes the human race. Cain typifies physical success; Abel stands for political power; both of these are destructible. Seth represents intellectual perfection which alone can achieve survival after death. Thus the story in Genesis that Adam begot a son in his own likeness and image and

called his name Seth, according to Narboni, does not relate the birth of a human being, but is the tale of the rise of reason in mankind. Narboni explains the deluge as referring to the flux of life on earth, the ceaseless process of change and destruction, intimating that the flood was not an actual historical event.

In other matters, too, Narboni ran counter to traditional thought patterns, such as on creation out of nothing and on immortality. He taught that the average person whose mind is not advanced along philosophical lines is like any animal that perishes at death. Survival and immortality, according to him, are earned by those who reach the full use of their mental faculties. Although he granted that God is the administrator of the universe and provides for the human species, he refused to concede that He has knowledge of, or concern for, individual human beings.

Abravanel felt very deeply on the matter. He held that Narboni and his 'infamous band,' Efodi and Caspi, were guilty of that most heinous offense, ruining the reputation of Maimonides by imputing to him heretical ideas and misleading the people. These men distorted the language and interpretations of Maimonides in the Guide. They used him as a convenient peg on which to hang their own heterodox ideas. They ventured to say that the sage understood the Sinaitic revelation as an act of philosophic comprehension. They went so far as to draw a parallel between the language in the Guide and biblical lan-

guage, taking the former to be the rationalization of the latter. "I am surprised," says Abravanel, "that anyone bearing the name Jew should teach that the spectacle seen by our ancestors at Sinai was an act of intellectual conception. I am shocked that this view should be attributed to Maimonides, violating so flagrantly his treatment of the subject in the Guide II, 23."

Abravanel had a sincere admiration for Saadia and for Judah Halevi. The latter had been set up by many of the philosophic traditionalists as their ideal. Holding fast to biblical teachings and spurning Greek thought Judah Halevi had reasoned out the soundness of old-fashioned Judaism. Abraham ibn Ezra did not meet with the favor of Abravanel because he brought down the miracles and wonders to the normal level of the natural.

The man whom Abravanel idolized, whom next to the Moses of the bible he esteemed the noblest Jewish personality, was Moses Maimonides. As a lad in common with many other thoughtful youths he became especially absorbed in the Guide for the Perplexed and throughout his life he lectured and wrote on it. He does not blindly assent to everything in it, for he found in it much that was debatable. Nevertheless, Maimonides loomed large before him as the most inspiring and stimulating of religious geniuses. He thanks God for having given him to Israel. The sage saved Judaism by his clear and profound exposition and defense of the three essential



dogmas—creation, God's all-knowledge, and His providence. On other beliefs Abravanel however did not always see eye to eye with Maimonides, understanding them differently very often. A contemporary of Abravanel, Joseph Jabez, who left Spain as an exile in 1492, knew Abravanel well and had heard his lectures on the Guide. In concluding a lecture, according to Jabez, Abravanel would occasionally say, "this is the view of our teacher Moses (Maimonides), not of (the biblical) Moses our master." Even the son of Maimon could not command sheepish submission to all his views. Hero worship has its limitations in Israel.

Most of the theological writing of Abravanel centers around the Guide on which he wrote a commentary as well as other treatises, some large and some small. In his bible discourses, too, he discusses freely Maimonides' views. As we have already seen, he condemns the rationalist commentators of the Guide, Narboni, Efodi, Caspi and Shem Tob. The superiority of his commentary over those of the others is like gold over brass. He is bent on refuting their interpretations of the Guide. He discusses the structure of the Guide with painstaking care and further analyzes and goes into great detail on the subjects treated in each chapter. As in his commentary on the bible, so here, he sometimes becomes so minute and microscopic in his examination that the treatment smacks of triviality. But always there are



the larger, important and relevant questions and answers that make his work weighty.

Among the questions he poses on the arrangement of the material in the Guide are these: Why does the exposition of corporeal descriptions of God in the bible precede the proofs for the existence and nature of God? It would seem that the reverse order would be more logical. Why are not prophecy and Ezekiel's chariot vision treated in one discussion? Why does the study of prophecy precede the one on God's providence and knowledge? Why are the reasons for the precepts not given as part of the section dealing with the Law's revelation? The precepts, too, are God-given. These questions are not meant to be destructive criticism; they are merely pegs on which to hang his ideas. His real attitude toward the Guide is one of highest admiration. He even takes childish delight in discovering that the total number of chapters in the Guide of one hundred and seventy-seven is also the numerical value of the letters in the Hebrew phrase *gan eden*, meaning paradise. The book to him is a veritable paradise for the intellectual seeker.

Abravanel dismisses the analogy built up by certain scholars between the threefold division of the Guide and the three levels of the universe. According to this, the first book of the Guide deals with God, the second with heaven (spheres and intelligences) and the third, with mankind and earth. Rejecting this fantastic notion, Abravanel sees in

the Guide the elaboration by many different proofs of the thirteen doctrines posited in Maimonides' mishna commentary. The first book of the Guide surveys the problems of God's nature, of His existence, unity and incorporeality. One of the big difficulties which Maimonides faced was the description of God's essence and emotions in the bible in human terms. He therefore set himself first the task of clearing the ground by explaining these corporealisms. This he did by putting forward his theory of homonyms. The Kalam system, too, is discussed in the first book because it held the revelationist approach to the God-idea. Thus the first forty-nine chapters of the Guide deal with homonyms; the next twenty-one chapters with anthropomorphic language; and the last five chapters of the first book with bygone Jewish lore, with the Kalam and its proofs for creation and for the one and incorporeal God.

The second book takes up the beliefs connected with the past history of Israel, with the God of creation and of prophecy, with Moses and the Law. In the preface to the second book Maimonides lays down certain principles leading up to the first chapter where he develops evidence concerning God. Chapters two to twelve treat of angels and planets viewed from the opposing standpoints of philosophy and bible. Chapters thirteen to thirty-two discuss the assumption of a created world. Chapters thirty-three to forty-eight are devoted to prophecy. The

third book of the Guide touches upon God's relation to man's life on earth. In it are found interwoven views on His knowledge of man's doings, on reward and punishment and on evil. It also includes a discussion of reasons for the precepts. The book closes with four beautiful chapters on the nature of true worship and wisdom which form a fitting garland for this noble work.

Abravanel notes the glaring omission of the doctrines of the messiah and the resurrection from the Guide. He has a ready reply, however, and he offers two reasons which may or may not sound satisfactory to the reader. One is that these doctrines are included under the general subject of providence and reward and punishment. There is no doubt that the eschatological destiny of the individual and of humanity is related to God's rule over man. It is obvious, however, that this is hardly an answer to the question why an exposition of the messianic advent and the resurrection finds no place in the Guide. The second reason offered by Abravanel however and one found in other writers also is much sounder, namely, that these beliefs are traditional, not philosophic truths, to be accepted entirely on faith, whereas the Guide is preeminently a philosophic work where logic, experience and observation are the sole sources of knowledge. That the sage did not neglect or abandon these beliefs appears from the fact that he wrote on them in his code and in separate essays.



Another of the thirteen articles that received no distinct treatment in the Guide is that God is the only proper object of worship. But Abravanel finds it embodied in the closing chapters that glowingly describe true worship. He makes what appears to his medieval mind the striking discovery that the Guide begins with the term *tzelem*, the divine pattern of reason, and closes with *hachma*, wisdom. It enshrines within its pages the highest goal of human striving, the religious life grounded in reason.

The delicate question where Maimonides stood on the allegorical versus the literal interpretation of holy writ, especially in the creation and Adam stories, is answered squarely by Abravanel. He says, "Although Maimonides made types and forms out of the creation account, of Adam and the woman, of the tree of life and knowledge, etc., etc., he does not reject their literalness. . . . Maimonides believed that the events actually occurred but held that in addition to the written meaning and the literal facts, there is an even greater meaning in the speculative knowledge stored therein." Unable to deny that Maimonides allegorizes he saves him in his own mind by assuming that he retained also the literal meaning. Don Isaac imputed to the sage the double standard of truth which many Christian and Jewish theologians took for granted, namely faith is right and reason is right, each in its own sphere. They cannot contradict one another because each one stems from a different basis of judgment. The phi-



losopher senses overtones in the biblical text to which the populace remains deaf. Abravanel however held that it has only one legitimate sense, the literal. Its early chapters are not allegory, much less myth, but true history relating the rise and progress of mankind and leading up to the era of divine revelation.

## 2

THE nature of God can never be known. In the passage, "And My face shall not be seen," the Hebrew word for face, *panim*, is a homonym which may also mean essence. If man had the ability to grasp the essence of God he could then rise to His own level becoming like God, or identical with Him. Our truest understanding of God is to realize philosophically that we cannot know Him. The many qualities and attributes drawn from human experience that we habitually ascribe to God do not touch or exhaust His real nature. Nay more, they are inadmissible because they imply plurality or many sidedness in Him, whereas the notion of the divine unity is fundamental. There is the difficulty also that in supposing that God has attributes we assume that they are eternal. But the eternity of attributes leads to a double contradiction; first, of the principle that God alone is eternal and second, of the principle that the world, namely, all quality and quantity not God, is a new creation. For this reason

Abravanel conceives of the ten spheres of the cabala not as substantive parts of God but as the visible effects of His will in administering the world.

Man's incapacity to fathom God's nature troubled Abravanel. This limitation does not accord with the view that reason is man's highest virtue, and that the essential test of man's value is his intellectuality. If he is shut out from knowing, his mind cannot reach full power, and human perfection is impossible. Abravanel is stumped by this query and refers the reader to Maimonides' discussion on possible and impossible knowledge.

When we pass from the contemplation of what God is to His relation with the universe, our ideas become a trifle less obscure. Next to the existence of God, the orthodox believer sets the world's creation as of the utmost importance. In fact he would posit first the creation of the world and from that infer the existence of a Supreme Being.

The main thesis of his philosophic writings, *Mifalot Elohim* and *Shamayim Hadashim*, is the defense of the concept of the world's creation against the philosophic theory of its eternity. Abravanel is one of those who regards creation as of primary and fundamental significance because on it rests the proof for the existence of God, for the revealed law, for reward and punishment and for many other doctrines. He combats the eternity views of Gersonides and Crescas and maintains that Maimonides, despite opinions to the contrary, accepted the doctrine of

creation. The Jewish rationalists had charged that Maimonides really favored eternity but for the sake of public opinion and to save the face of tradition he declared himself for creation.

Abravanel in discussing the question of how Moses acquired the idea of creation presents several hypotheses. He mentions the possibility that it was a conviction gained from personal inquiry and investigation. Other views which he mentions are that he inherited it as a tradition, or that it was imparted to him through prophecy. Abravanel himself accepts the latter view; namely, that Moses received it directly as a revelation from God. Indeed prophecy is at least just as reliable a medium as philosophy to obtain knowledge both metaphysical and natural. This fine thought, that prophetic insight may be as sound as philosophic reasoning in fetching us ultimate truth, and may yield us important knowledge, is offset by Abravanel's naïve thinking that we can draw on Abraham and Moses for testimony on creation. He thought they had first-hand information. For Abraham knew Noah personally and received from him a report direct from the antediluvians about the world's origin. Moses, living 200 years after Abraham, could still obtain the recent, fresh impressions of patriarchal times about the creation.

The main objection of Judaism to an eternal world is that its existence must in that case be put down as necessary. If we do that, God is shorn of volition, power and goodness for He had nothing to



do in its formation. This objection was met by Crescas and Nissim whom Abravanel does not spare for masking, as he thinks, their infidelity under the cloak of piety. These men argued that it is possible to conceive of an uncreated world, not being of necessary existence but the result of His voluntary act. They showed their true color and made their position indefensible, maintained Abravanel, by saying that the creation story is a story, not a precept or command. As a bible story we are expected to believe it but at the same time one who rejects it is not guilty of heresy. These men found comfort and confirmation in the fact that Maimonides did not include creation in his creed.

In rebutting these arguments, Abravanel states it does not ease the difficulty simply to drop the term necessary from the uncreated world and calling it voluntary when the principle of its eternity ipso facto implies an unconditioned or necessary existence. Abravanel finds the argument that the belief in creation is not binding because it is not a precept is false. If that be the case we need not believe in God, for there is nowhere a clear command to do so. Again Maimonides' omission of it in the creed cannot be used to support the rationalist, for creation is imbedded in the fourth article that God alone is eternal, hence everything else is created.

Abravanel is searching in his analysis of the philosophers' contention that nothing can come from



nothing. To say that it can, they maintain, is to affirm an impossibility. Now Abravanel does not deny that there are certain impossibilities. But he divides them into two kinds, logical and experiential. The first is the absolute impossibility, as that a thing should be and not be at the same time, or that a thing should be both negative and positive or black and white at the same time. The other kind of impossibility is relative, as that of the power of the infant to carry a heavy load, or of a person to fly in the air. The creation of the world out of nothing which religion teaches is an impossibility of the second type. It may appear impossible to man from his own limited point of view and from his finite observation and experience in a world where things evolve out of one another. But it is not impossible for an all-powerful and all-wise God to have created out of nothing. Abravanel here falls back on the argument from inscrutability.

He takes up in detail the arguments of the Aristotelian school against the world's creation out of nothing. The results of a detailed investigation of natural objects shows that everything has its antecedent. Every object comes from a definite, specific cause, such as seed, egg, semen. Furthermore, a created world means a possible world; but possibility has to inhere in a certain something, which in turn has to have existence before creation. In other words, the world or its substratum is eternal.

Abravanel refutes each contention. No examina-

tion of existing things can include every possible object. So that it is not improbable that even the Aristotelian classifiers with all their thoroughness might have omitted certain types which would disprove their rule that nothing can come from nothing. As for the view that the world must have a specific origin in some stratum he says that it appeared not from but after absolute nothingness. Unlike the hen which can come into being only from an egg, the world did not need any primordial form to give it its present character. To the third argument Abravanel answered that the possibility of a created world was in its Maker, in God, and not in any supposititious matter.

Abravanel attempts a refutation also of the reasons offered by Gersonides for an eternal world. To the latter, created world in space implies the existence of a vacuum, which philosophers rejected. Abravanel holds that before creation there was no space. Hence the world, its location and space are all one and were determined by God.

Certain views intermediate between absolute eternity on the one hand and creation out of nothing on the other have been put forward by Greek philosophers and have been espoused by Jewish liberals. For example, there is Plato's view of primary matter out of which was molded the entire universe, its upper and lower levels. There is the idea of Anaxagoras and Empedocles, Parmenides and Melissus, that the planets and the universal types

are eternal, but that all particular and specific things were created in time. This heretical view, says Abravanel, was held by certain astrologers, as well as by the 'accursed group,' Gersonides, Narboni, Caspi, Palakera and Albalag.

In giving Maimonides' refutation of the existence of primary matter, Abravanel is really affirming his own viewpoint. It is simply impossible for matter to exist infinitely without form. Such existence is a self-contradiction for nothing can really be said to exist if it is without form. Abravanel takes sound exception to the formal argument of Gersonides that just as we find form without matter, and form with matter, so there could have been matter without form.

The religionist's objection to primary matter is that it implies two eternal beings, God and matter. If matter is primordial, it is eternal; if it is eternal, it is supreme. But God is eternal and supreme. God and matter must therefore be identical, one. But this is an impossible belief because it would make God material and His incorporeality has already been established on different grounds.

We must always bear in mind that even though Abravanel calls Gersonides a heretic, the latter was a good orthodox Jew and strove valiantly to make his philosophy conform to traditional Judaism. Thus on the question of eternity he wanted to make the idea of primary matter palatable to his conservative colleagues. He contended that there is a sharp dif-



ference in quality between the eternal God and eternal matter; they stand wide apart. But Abravanel is not satisfied on the ground that this would lead to another blind alley. Such a qualitative distinction would give us two eternal but varying sources of being, one of goodness, the other of evil, an idea that is akin to Mani dualism. While Abravanel enters upon a prolonged discussion of philosophic arguments on such questions as creation and eternity, as a matter of sober fact all this is by way of polemic and refutation. His own stand he establishes on tradition and authority. The affirmative aspects of his views he derives from the bible. His main reliance is on the Genesis account of creation. It is central and basic also for his other beliefs.

He is naturally also happy to find himself in the company of Maimonides in whom he found intellectual support for his cherished beliefs. Thus he quotes with admiration and approval the master's defense of creation from harmony and purposiveness, from the complex and highly organized arrangement of the celestial system, the specialization of function seen everywhere. Contrary to Aristotle and his followers, who point to the variety in the position and in the velocity of the planets and the stars as proof that the world is without plan and a planner who created it, Abravanel siding with Maimonides declares that it was struck off by the conscious and supreme mind of the divine architect.

Having established to his own satisfaction the



doctrine that the world was created *ex nihilo* he then turns to the next problem of the process of creation. The theory of emanation, explaining the origin of the world, is one of the moot and most nebulous which the past ages have bequeathed us. Abravanel does not disappoint our anticipation of meeting a discussion on emanation in his works. While his discourses on the subject undoubtedly were beyond the interest and the comprehension of the populace one must note that what passed for philosophy was but vague musing. The two members of the equation of life are God and the universe. God is the remote, the unknown and unknowable of the equation; the universe is knowable, within our ken, within the sphere of our experience. What, one asks, is the historical relation between the two? How did the one come from the other? Avicenna and others hold that God's self-intellection produced an angel or, as it is called in this literature, a separate-intelligence. This was the first effect which came forth from God. This separate intelligence in turn indulged in thinking about itself and thereby produced two things, another angel and the uppermost sphere. The latter angel's intellectual activity in thinking about itself gave rise further to two effects, another angel and another sphere. This process involved the gradual diminution of the intellectual and the corresponding intensification of the material. So that starting out from pure mind, God, there was created by this series finally the tenth or lowest sphere,

namely, the active reason. In this view, the one simple God can produce directly only one being. The other beings are produced through intermediaries. Another theory of emanation, expounded by Maimonides and the Averroists, was that all the intelligences and the spheres sprang directly from God and did not come in a successive series from one another but had their source directly in God as the children of one father. These emanations too are distinguished by the purity of their substance.

These two theories of emanation were offered as upholding the view of the world's eternity. Abravanel of course rejects that view, giving Maimonides' incisive refutation of Aristotle's arguments and showing the improbabilities of that doctrine. Our author rejects both theories of emanation in their complete statement, but accepts part of each theory and fuses them together. Averroes' view is true as regards the time of creation and that of Avicenna for a subsequent time when the separate intelligences were paired with the planets. In addition to these intelligences which, in some way not clear to us, were separate from the spheres, the latter had a rational soul that gave them animation and motion.

"Indeed, would that we believers in the torah and in creation knew how to interpret this matter of emanation! Shall we say that at the beginning of creation God created and engendered one separate intelligence and that from it by way of emanation the other intelligences and spheres were derived as

Avicenna held, or that all things were created and engendered from God, as Averroes held? And again, shall we hold that the preservation and existence of the world are derived from God by way of successive emanations with Avicenna, or that it owes its existence and its movement directly to God, without any intermediate agency, with Averroes? For those of us who believe in creation, both opinions are acceptable provided they are differentiated as to time. At the beginning of creation the separate intelligences and heavenly substances were engendered from and made by God without any medium, for they are all His handiwork. However after they were created He arranged them according to their respective functions. Thus He assigned each separate intelligence to the movement of a particular sphere, as Avicenna held. Whatever is good in this inquiry we accept, and the bad, namely the world's eternity, we will not accept. For these two opinions can be harmonized in the way I suggest if we grant creation."

Abravanel here again shows his essential traditionalism. He accepts those theories and as much of them as accord with his own religious predilections. His theory of emanation which is the resultant of two others can be read strikingly into the opening chapters of the Pentateuch. This, of course, is quite deliberate with him because to him philosophy is meaningful only when it fits religion. He points out in so many words that his theory was



anticipated by scripture, Targum Jonathan ben Uziel, the midrashim and Maimonides. It need not be added, of course, that the theology of Abravanel was far more traditionalist than that of Maimonides.

A striking illustration of Abravanel's literal acceptance of scriptural text is the biblical description of the scene which the elders of Israel beheld. "And they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not his hand; and they beheld God, and did eat and drink." This vision, says Abravanel, was most real. The princes actually perceived the celestial world of spheres and angels and God's abode. The spheres are called sapphire for their luster; they are bright and glistening from their unceasing motion and functioning. This conception Abravanel offers in opposition to Maimonides who took the vision as a search for primary matter (sapphire stone). In support of this view Maimonides had offered the homily from the Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer to the effect that the heavens were made from the light of the Deity's garment and the earth from the snow under His throne of glory. Here light and snow are regarded as primary substances. In the vision seen by the princes there was the attempt to grasp the nature of the substratum out of which the world was formed. The same conclusion is drawn from the symbolism in Ezekiel's chariot



vision. Abravanel, on the other hand, holds that the question at issue in the biblical and agadic passages is not the nature of primary elements, but of God, producer and ruler of the celestial empire.

On the Cause of the revolution of the planets, also, Abravanel takes a stand apart from other theologians. They had removed God from the cosmos as its direct and propelling force, and had rested His power in His chief emanation. Our author, however, maintained that the source was God and that He was the prime and immediate mover of all the planets.

The entire universe has three parts or levels. The highest contains God and the angels. The latter are very numerous although they can be reduced to ten groups and so brought into accord with the philosophic notion of ten separate intelligences. The middle level is that of the spheres or planets. The science dealing with them covers the topics of their substance, whether material or immaterial; their number, whether ten or more; their shape, whether spherical or not; their location; their movement, direction and velocity; the cause of their motion; their duration, whether eternal or not; and their influence on the earth. The lowest level, our earth, holds ten ascending grades of existence, covering the wide range of subjects included under natural science. These are primary elements, primary forms, particular form, accidental forms, unusual meteorological phenomena, weather conditions, metals, vege-

tative life, animal life and human beings. In this discussion Abravanel uses the labored and pedantic style of quoting in great detail book, chapter and verse of his sources, Aristotle, Averroes and Algazali.

He believed, as did the mystics and certain Greek schools, that there were many worlds before ours and that there will be many after it is gone. We or our descendants may therefore look forward to the passing away of the present world.

## 3

WE NOW turn from the creation and the constitution of the universe to its day by day administration. This, too, was a wide-spread subject of inquiry which dealt with several problems. The scholastics raised the question of method, how does God reign over the world? The theological term, of course, is providence. Radical philosophy generally denied providence, maintaining that all that occurs, occurs by pure chance. The other extreme view was held by the orthodox Arabs who believed that whatever God does is by a free, even a capricious and arbitrary will. The Jews, however, believe that the world is ruled by *din*, by the rule of justice, retribution and compensation. The scholastics, including the Averroists, held that the celestial beings determine the condition and the fate of everything and everybody in the universe. Abravanel, too, believes in this but with an exception. While non-Jewish

peoples are under the control of the stars and each has its welfare and fate appointed by its particular star, Israel is under the very special and direct protection of God Himself. Abravanel following tradition accepts the principle of Israel's uniqueness as a select and preferred people. It rested on bible teachings; it was sanctioned by the lore of talmud and midrash. It is attested by the people's miraculous survival in the face of the innumerable attempts to crush them. He tries to give this theory some intellectual plausibility by building up an analogy from the three levels of existence: angels, spheres and peoples. In the world of angels there is a first emanation which is the most perfect of all. In the world of spheres, there is one, the all-embracing sphere, which is choice. So among all the nations on earth Israel is predestined to be the most enduring and the most beneficent, the one with the most sublime purpose.

The election of Israel meant that God Himself in His divine glory (shekina) provides for Israel. The relation between nation and Deity is not fixed by the inexorable law of cause and effect, but by the quality of love and mercy. This is the meaning of the words in the story of Isaac's binding, when Abraham says to his bewildered son, in answer to his question about an animal for the sacrifice, "The Lord will provide." Abravanel gives this explanation for the apparent contradiction to his theory in the appointment of an angel by God to watch over



Israel. The angel was the first effect of God Himself, identical with the power called by the rabbis the metatron. He was not given permanent charge over the people, but rather served temporarily during their stay in the wilderness. The place was not fit, nor the time ripe, for a perfect communion between the people and God. It took a generation to make free men out of slaves, to forget the flesh-pots of Egypt in the spiritual aura of the promised land, to forge that divine-human link between their Father Who is in heaven and His beloved children of Israel.

Abravanel believed in astrology as did most medieval men. He probably did not know it as thoroughly as some others; many had made this a science and a profession. Ibn Ezra was a court astrologer. Indeed Maimonides was one of the rare souls who escaped its influence altogether. Abravanel defends astrology on the pragmatic ground that it is useful, that people practice it and gain results through it. Furthermore, scripture supports it. The creation story tells us that the luminaries were placed in the skies to rule, that is, to exercise control over sublunar bodies. Deborah sings of the stars in their courses fighting against Sisera. The talmud and midrash are replete with statements showing that the rabbis accepted astrological ideas.

The influence of celestial bodies upon the earth is twofold, upon nations and upon individuals. We have already spoken about their relation to the course and destiny of nations. The individual man



is subject physically to the planets and spiritually to the separate intelligences. His future is determined by the circumstance of his conception or birth under one or another of the twelve signs of the zodiac. Whereas the fate of Israel as a people is not given to the stars to determine, the individual Jew in common with all other individuals does come under planetary influence (mazzal).

Abravanel recognizes that the astrological conception of mazzal contradicts the Jewish doctrine of freedom of the will and human responsibility. He therefore sets up several reservations on the extent of the influence of the stars. The star or planet can not determine one's piety, it can not impel one to observe or violate a precept; it can not mold character, although it endows the individual with a certain predisposition or attitude, *hakana*, toward virtue or vice. But the final choice of the kind of life one will live is left with the individual. Again, the star's influence may be overcome by the divine will. The prayer of man, too, may succeed in thwarting the decree of astral fate. Unless astrology surrounds itself with all these exceptions it would have to deny the miracles of the bible, for these imply the breakdown of the law of cause and effect and involve divine intervention. If predetermination were a hard and fast law, the dogma of reward and punishment likewise would fall to the ground since one cannot justly be held responsible for that to which he is predestined.

In this, astrology was not alone in its self-contradiction. The metaphysicians also faced the antinomy of freedom and necessity. Theologically, if God is omniscient, how can man be said to have freedom of choice, and without it, why should he be held responsible for his conduct on earth? The answers of the great minds of philosophy were no more satisfying than those of the lesser minds of astrology.

Abravanel though accepting astrology admitted the pseudo-scientific character of much in it. In his bold and wise moments he denounced it, but unlike Maimonides, he was not clear-minded or logical enough to renounce it completely. And this is true of his attitude toward other superstitions also, as well as in his interpretations of religious beliefs. His unbending orthodoxy led him to challenge Maimonides on the nature of prophecy. He denied especially the part that the active reason, an invention of the rationalists, was said by them to have played in the production of prophecy. He took issue with Gersonides who held that prophecy was not much different than dreaming and that therefore it did not offer any otherwise unattainable knowledge, but information of a rather mundane nature. Abravanel offers a bouquet to Aristotle for not reducing prophecy to a natural experience.

Don Isaac held that if philosophy comes to a person only by virtue of his highly intellectual powers as the rationalists have said, it is strange that it

should be limited to a small group in Israel and to Palestine. It should be universal. The fact that the prophetic communications of Moses were accompanied by wonders and awful phenomena shows that it was not a natural, normal experience. The talmudic statement restricting the shekina or divine glory to the wise, strong and wealthy person is not to the point, because the presence of the divine glory and the gift of prophecy are two entirely different experiences. By its very nature and function prophecy cannot be contingent merely upon human qualifications.

The process of transmitting the divine inspiration to the prophet is another matter on which our author takes issue with Maimonides. The earlier sage held that it derived from God and through the medium of the active intellect affected first man's rational and then his imaginative faculties. If this be so, argues Abravanel, all prophecy should assume the form of poetic or figurative utterance, since it is framed by the imagination. The fact is that the patriarchs and prophets often pronounce their oracles in prosaic language. He concludes then that the active intellect played no part in prophecy. God inspired the prophet directly. Where scriptures speak of 'dreaming' in connection with prophecy, it is to describe a state in which the seer is overwhelmed by the inspiration. The invidious distinction which Maimonides raised between Moses and the other prophets was distasteful to Abravanel. He



objects to applying the term prophet homonymously. Moses did excel in priority and in degree, but not in kind. Reading into Maimonides another distinction between Moses and the prophets, Abravanel maintained that it was wrong to suppose that only Moses performed real miracles, and that the seers who succeeded were inferior to him and incapable of miraculous phenomena. Abravanel agreed with Maimonides, however, that miracles are not always the test of prophecy. Abraham wrought few wonders, while Elisha, greatly his inferior in prophecy as in other respects, performed many.

The last of the twelve queries put to Abravanel by Saul Hacoen was on the summum bonum and Aristotle's definition of it. After giving the popular opinion that it consists either in physical pleasure, in wealth or in the getting of office and prestige, he states that Aristotle held it to consist in the performance of that function which sets man apart from the animal, in the exercise of the intellect or reason which is man's highest property. It is the most enduring, and has the additional virtue that indulgence therein is out of pure love for it without ulterior motive. Through reason man reaches to the level of an angel. The very longing for mental speculation is a proof of the soul's immortality, else the longing would be futile. According to Abravanel, this concept of Aristotle that had been taken over by Maimonides and Gersonides, is all wrong. Simply to use a certain faculty or talent, in this case the



reasoning power, is no guarantee of immortality, any more than would be the talent to sing or to paint. Immortality is a religious concept and is reserved for those who live moral and pious lives.\*

## 4

AN important controversy in the history of Jewish theology was the question of creedal formulation. On the one hand, the extreme orthodox held that everyone of the six hundred and thirteen scriptural precepts was fundamental and binding both as to belief and practice. They held it a denigration of those aspects of tradition which were not included as dogma. On the other side the rationalist philosophers posited certain ideas as basic in Judaism and held that all others were either derivatory or else not indispensable. Many centuries after our author, Moses Mendelssohn postulated that Judaism was not a religion or dogma, but a holy legislation.

Abravanel defends Maimonides against Crescas and Albo who had criticized his creed of thirteen articles. He hails Maimonides as the first to give Judaism a much needed formulation of the essential tenets of faith. He deplores the action of succeeding theologians in bewildering the people by their many creedal tabulations. Don Isaac himself did not be-

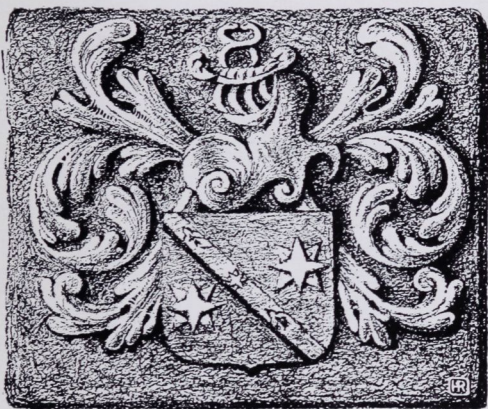
\* For a fuller discussion of retribution and immortality see Sarachek, "Faith and Reason," ch. 4; and also "Doctrine of the Messiah," pp. 188 et seq.

lieve that Judaism had a creed or dogmas and accounted for Maimonides' formulation on the ground that he imitated the ratiocination of the scientists and metaphysicians, so popular with Jews. They dealt with theorems, categories and premises, and had influenced the rabbis in making classifications of primary and indispensable teachings. To Abravanel, the entire contents of scripture, having been revealed by the one God, were of equal value and equally binding. One could not assort the contents of scripture into parts that were cardinal to the faith and others that were secondary. Maimonides himself had declared, "There is no difference in authority between the contents of a genealogical chapter in Genesis, the Ten Commandments, and the shema." Furthermore, if the Maimonean principles alone were indispensable, they would either have been made part and parcel of the Ten Commandments or of the additional legislation revealed at Sinai and found in the code of the covenant, or they would have been placed at the beginning of Genesis to show that the whole revelation was built on them.

The absence in the talmud of any classification of beliefs in their order of importance, should convince us that Maimonides' creed has no precedent or warrant in the past, and hence should have been avoided. Abravanel was not unaware of the declaration in the tractate Sanhedrin that the rejection of any one of six enumerated beliefs bars one from the future life. In answer to this he calls attention to

the opening affirmation, "All Israel have a share in the world to come." This blanket phrase embraces everybody and deliberately ignores doctrinal stipulations. The order in which the mishna states the beliefs, resurrection, revelation of torah, and the existence of God shows that it meant no dogmatic emphasis. Otherwise it would have reversed the order for belief in God and in torah are certainly more primary than belief in resurrection.

Abravanel seeks to exonerate his hero for an act of commission which appeared serious in his eyes. He declares that the sage did not intend primarily to enumerate principles of graded ranks, but to systematize the Jewish philosophic concepts for the benefit of students and the people at large. Those are to be considered essential only from the point of view of the learner, and not as possessing more intrinsic worth than certain other teachings. This explains why the thirteen articles are given in his commentary to the mishna and not in the Code or Guide. The first was the author's youthful effort and the creed answered the needs of the student for a knowledge of fundamentals. The Guide, a product of middle age, was intended for mature thinkers, for whom the thirteen articles would be too elementary. The choice of the number thirteen is not artificial; it is not as some thought symbolic of the thirteen attributes of God, or of the thirteen rules of bible interpretation. Maimonides found that there were three main philosophic problems motivat-



*Courtesy, FUNK & WAGNALL'S CO., publishers  
of The Jewish Encyclopedia.*

### ABRAVANEL COAT OF ARMS

*(From the Archives of the Amsterdam Portu-  
guese Congregation)*





ing Judaism, the perfection of God, His relation to the world, and the rationality of Judaism. Upon further investigation he discovered that the ideas enunciated in the thirteen doctrines illumined and solved the great quest.

It is hard for us to understand why Abravanel, convinced that Judaism has no creed, should defend the one by Maimonides. This is especially so since in other matters he felt free to disagree with the master. Perhaps Abravanel recognized that there was but one choice as between Crescas and Maimonides. It is possible, too, that in the presence of so many credos, Abravanel was willing to accept the one by Maimonides as the least evil.

He sets up several criteria by which to determine the essential Jewish dogmas in order to account for Maimonides' omission of many others that were proposed later by Crescas. First, the doctrine must be characteristically Jewish and shall not share in common the dogmatic nature of any other religious system. Secondly, it must be a belief and not a performable precept. Religion involves acts and beliefs. One who violates a performable command will be punished but he does not thereby become an infidel or a heretic. The precepts to love God, to love our neighbor and the like, are not proper subjects for dogmatic statement because they call for specific performance. Thirdly, it must not express certain ethical and philosophic assumptions, such as the existence of a soul in man, immortality, free will,

and the belief that the spheres are intellectual bodies. These beliefs are equally consistent with non-Jewish systems of thought and hence are not exclusively cardinal in Judaism. Fourthly, it must not either be contingent or temporary. And lastly, it must not be implied in others.

The beliefs suggested by Crescas have been omitted by Maimonides for one or another of these reasons. The belief that the divine glory is present in Israel through the mediacy of the torah is omitted, because it is contingent upon the existence of the sanctuary. Creation out of nothing is implied in the fourth article that God is first, kadmon. By deduction everything else is created. Belief in miracles is involved in the eighth article that the torah was revealed at Sinai, a miracle of the first order. If one assents to that, he must accept the possibility of miracles. This belief follows also from the article affirming omnipotence. The authority of tradition requires no creedal formulation. In describing the first doctrine the sage affirmed the obligation of accepting tradition or talmud along with scripture. This is another reason also why he passes over the teachings concerning the soul and its immortality. The teaching of free will is omitted because the sage does not deal with human instincts, but only with matters of faith concerning God. Free will is a universal religious view, as old as man himself, and antedates the torah. Certain attributes of God indispensable in our conception of Him are deducible

from the articles. His volition is a corollary of the fifth article. His eternity and omnipotence and being alive are all implied in the first article of His perfect existence. The eschatological tenets are embraced in the eleventh article concerning reward and punishment. Belief in the urim and thummim is comprehended in the sixth article on prophecy. It is a manifestation of prophecy. In the Guide II, 45, Maimonides ranks it second in the scale of prophetic communication. Such teachings as the efficacy of prayer and of repentance are specific laws and duties and as such do not enter the category of doctrines.

Abravanel explains away the objections raised by Crescas against Maimonides' description of the belief in God's existence as a precept (*mitzvah*). Crescas argued that this belief is intuitive, that it is not distinctively Jewish, but the basis of all spiritual faith and a condition for all precepts. Hence we cannot speak of it as a precept. To this Abravanel replies that the precept is not to believe that He exists, but that He exists as a necessary and perfect being. Crescas' other objection that a precept requires choice in accepting it whereas belief in God is mandatory, is answered as follows; the precept is to the effect that man should live so nobly and acquire such knowledge as will make automatic the belief in God.

Having accounted for Maimonides' omissions, Abravanel explains the inclusion in the creed of beliefs that Crescas would omit. Since we call *ikkar*,



doctrine, not only the indispensable but also the prominent, there can be no objection to including unity and immateriality, which Crescas would omit because they are embraced in the first article of His perfect existence. Furthermore these two doctrines were included because of Maimonides' desire to provide a creed for the masses and not for philosophers. The latter could make the right deductions from the primary beliefs, but the ordinary person must be told clearly what is most important. In this way he could attain a high level of perfection without resorting to metaphysical study.

Abravanel condemns the views of Maimonides' first critic Abraham ben David and the later philosopher Joseph Albo who declare that it is not heretical to believe that God is corporeal, because scripture describes Him thus. A heretic, they argue, is one who intentionally rejects the beliefs. Abravanel holds that it does not matter whether one holds an erroneous belief innocently or spitefully; the effect is the same. It will deprive the sinner of reward in the hereafter. Abravanel's critique of Crescas' dogmatics may be applied to Albo also.

Of all the personalities at the time of the expulsion, Abravanel looms largest. The impress that he left upon Jewish theology was deep and indelible and it may have been his defense of Maimonides' creed that made it the choice of the synagogue. Turning from his religious notions to Abravanel's social and political theories we find that even as

he frowns upon the sophistication of the philosophers so too does he hold in disdain the extravagance and artificiality of man-made civilization.

In spite of his commercial activity and his connection with the busy affairs of European rulers, Abravanel regarded civilization as a curse. The early, pastoral state of man was ideal; it was simple, uncompetitive, peaceful, honest. Nature satisfied man's needs. It was science and invention and the building of cities that made man a slave to work, that created superfluities and the evils of materialism, injustice and crime. By nature and birth the children of men are free and equal. According to the plan of creation all things were to be common and free for everybody like language and air. No individual was endowed with more than anybody else. However, with the invention of the arts and the crafts, of city building and city life, private wealth and property with their attendant evils arose and human brotherhood was destroyed. Abravanel praises the simple rustic economy wherein a person would make his clothes of the wool of his own lamb and not buy them from the city merchant. He asks why God did not forbid Israel from living the life of city people and answers, "When God saw that man and his progeny were steeped in the lust for the superfluous and for the artificial ways of living, he did not prohibit that life to Israel because He foresaw that Israel being human could not desist from it. But He warned the people

to comport themselves in those pursuits with justice and dignity and not disgracefully."

Essentially Abravanel was medieval in his thinking. It is only rarely that we can look to him for light on current religious and social problems. He was too much the child of his own age. One discovers in his political opinions however a refreshing modernism. He rejects the divine right of kings and considers monarchy, even if it be only limited, as a form of government inferior to republicanism. In this of course he is in line with the high ideals of Jewish tradition which in its earliest days disapproved of the rule of man by man. The theocratic ideal of old centered on the equality of all men, for all men were the children of God. Abravanel finds support for his view in the reluctance of the prophet Samuel to establish a kingship in Israel. He contrasts the life of Israel under the judges with that under the kings sensing that the former was truer to the democratic spirit of Judaism. The judges were chosen from the mass of the people. They were subject to popular will. In the nature of the case the kings ruled by different methods. That Abravanel was on sound historical ground may be seen from the fact that even after the kingship was established the old democratic ideals of the wilderness were strong enough to protect the prophets Nathan and Elijah who dared the displeasure of their kings in the cause of justice. His Jewish background of faith in his fellow-men and distrust in autocrats, received reinforcement



from his own sad experiences with the kings of Portugal, Spain and Naples.

He is acquainted with the political philosophy of his day which postulated dictatorial monarchy as the ideal state. He rejects *seriatim* its alleged advantages and presents with cogency the arguments for an elected officialdom whose tenure of office and power are limited, with the opportunity lessened to enrich itself at the expense of the people by corruption and misgovernment. His approach is so much like our own American outlook on this matter that we shall quote him somewhat at length.

"This is a proper subject for inquiry, namely whether a king is a necessity, inherently needed by the people, or whether they can exist without him. The political writers take the former view, and maintain that the service of the king to the people in the state is like the function of the heart in the body of an animal or like the relation of the first cause to the universe. These philosophers enumerate three advantages of a kingdom, undivided authority, continuity of governmental functioning and absolute power. This position is fallacious. It is not impracticable for a people to have many leaders gathered together, united, agreeing in one counsel, and directing administrative and judicial affairs. Why should not their administration be for one year, or for three years like the term of a worker, or even less than that? When other judges and officers assume office, they will investigate the wrongdoing of their prede-



cessors and whomever they will condemn shall make good the wrong committed. Why should not their power be limited and regulated according to laws and statutes? It is more likely that one man should do wrong than many men. For if one of them would turn from the right path the others will check him. Since their administration is temporary and they must give an account after a short while, the fear of their fellow-men will restrain them from wrongdoing.

“But what need is there to prove this with abstract arguments, since experience is more convincing than logic? Look about and see the countries where the administration is in the hands of kings and compare them with present-day governments where the administration is in the hands of judges and where temporary rulers are elected. The leaders rule over the people in war as in peace and are equally effective in both.

“Dost thou not know? Hast thou not heard that there was a great empire (ancient Rome) that ruled over the whole world? She devoured the earth and ground it to dust when her administration was in the hands of consuls who were faithful though numerous and holding temporary office. But when an emperor seized power, it became tributary to barbaric hordes. Even today Venice rules as a mistress, great among nations and priceless among the states, and the government of Florence is the glory of all the lands. There are other countries, great and small, which

have no king, and are governed by leaders elected for a fixed time. In the elected governments there is nothing corrupt, no man lifts his hand or his foot to commit any trespass. They conquer countries and rule them with wisdom, understanding and knowledge. All this proves that the existence of a king is not necessary, but is harmful and a great danger.

“I therefore think that kings were at first set up not by the people’s election, but by force, and the one that was stronger prevailed. Even these were only accepted as a matter of trust, to serve the people; but they made themselves masters, as if God had given them the earth and its fullness, and they bequeathed it to their children and their children’s children for ever, as if it were a plot of land which one acquires for money. This however is not alike in all kingdoms for in constitutional monarchies the king does not have unlimited power in the administration.”



*PART IV*

THE DREAMER





## PART IV

### THE DREAMER

**T**HE BREAK-UP of Jewish life in Spain and the life-and-death struggle in new countries tried the faith of the masses. It was not now a question of saving Judaism by squaring it with Aristotelian philosophy as did Maimonides and others. The crisis demanded the sustaining of the people's will to survive against the satanic plan to destroy them. Abravanel met this demand with loyal ardor. He felt most keenly his people's misery and he strove to reanimate their forlorn hope in a Messiah. He closes the *Ateret Zekenim* with this pious wish: "I entreat God, I beseech His Presence that he may behold the oppression of His people, be mindful of our affliction and abasement and bring us up from amongst all nations to the place of justice, the chosen land. As in days of yore, may He establish us forever upon our soil, and raise up unto us a faithful shepherd."

#### 1

HIS TREATMENT of the messianic future stands out boldly from that of earlier writers in sheer size, de-

tail, keen polemical argument, and in the full discussion of every aspect of the question. He wrote three very valuable books on it, "The Wells of Salvation," "The Proclaimer of Salvation," and "The Salvation of His Anointed." In these works his utopian views are profusely and exhaustively given. The first one is an exposition of Daniel's prophecies; the second, of all the messianic utterances in the Mosaic and prophetic writings; and the third deals with rabbinic messianism. Other writings which inform us of his views on the matter are his commentaries on the bible and the Ethics of the Fathers as well as some of his smaller books. No one before had attempted this task on so large a scale and in such microscopic fashion. In the last book the writer presents for refutation a large number of legends and homilies that were used by Christians to demonstrate, (a) that the Messiah had already come; (b) that he was divine; (c) that the Mosaic Law had been abrogated in the new era; (d) that redemption was to be otherworldly rather than political and social.

In the preface to "The Salvation of His Anointed," he castigates the Jewish apostates who bring shame and alarm upon Israel by denying the Jewish doctrine, and who summon Israel's leaders to disputations before kings, prelates and vast multitudes. The traitor, Joshua Lorki, who opposed the most illustrious rabbis in the bitter debate at Tortosa, in 1413-1414, is singled out as the special target of the

writer's odium. He sets out to disprove the Christian interpretation of messianic passages in the bible and talmud. First, he showed that the promises of redemption are not to be understood as purely spiritual and moral. It was charged that the deliverance of which the prophets speak does not mean liberation from physical distress and exile, but liberation from sin. Christians held that the term Israel in the prophecies did not refer to the descendants of the historical nation, but represented the Church, the regenerated mankind of the future. In Abravanel's opinion the claim was preposterous. The direct and realistic language of the predictions and the distressing circumstances that evoked them force us to take the promises to refer to Israel's physical and material release.

Secondly, he offered evidence that Jesus was not the expected Messiah and denied the allegation that the sages acknowledged him as such. Nothing, he said, was further from the truth. As a matter of fact, Israel turned a deaf ear to him and to his apostles. It was these very sages who tried and adjudged him guilty. Instead of following him, the leaders strengthened Judaism and built it up more firmly than ever. The best proof that they did not accept him is the fact that they continued to ponder the question of the future coming of the anointed one. Thirdly, he essayed to show that the biblical predictions were neither wholly nor partially fulfilled at the return of the exiles from Babylon and in the



establishment of the second commonwealth. This was the contention of many critical bible scholars among the Jews, such as Judah ibn Balaam, Hayyim Galipapa, Moses Cohen and Abraham ibn Ezra.

Our author follows the talmud and the midrash in his messianic explanations of numerous passages in holy writ. The vision of Abraham in Genesis 15 disclosed to the patriarch the subjection of his progeny to the four world empires and their eventual liberation by the Messiah. The heifer symbolizes Rome; the she-goat, Greece; the ram, Persia; the turtle dove, Islam; the young pigeon, Israel; the bird of prey is the Messiah. Jacob's blessing to Judah (Gen. 49:10) contains an assurance that the tribe of Judah will always be in the ascendant. It will produce the foremost teachers and leaders both in the holy land and in the diaspora, for Israel in exile is mainly of the tribe of Judah. It will retain its supremacy for ever so long a time, even until the Messiah's advent.

The first clear statement of the destruction of Israel's foes and her triumph is found in the utterances of Balaam, the first of the seventeen messengers to proclaim the ideal future. The passage predicts that Edom will be vanquished and become forfeit to Israel. Abravanel gives a clever turn to the clause, "There shall step forth a star out of Jacob"; making it mean that the constellation which under God holds Israel in exile will decline and give way to the Messiah in the new age.

Abravanel sets up his messianic scheme in great detail, deriving it largely from several passages in Deuteronomy. The holy land is given to Israel as a permanent possession. God Himself will deliver Israel and not an agent like Cyrus as in former times, making the deliverance absolute. The restoration will include all Israel, where formerly only a fraction of the population returned from Babylon. All who belong to the seed of Israel, even sinners and apostates, will be redeemed. They may have strayed far away but they ever remained the sheep of God's fold. Violence, enticements or other extenuating circumstances may account for their lapses. The shekina, prophecy and other holy functions will be restored. Israel's foes will meet deserved punishment. Israel will be supreme over the nations, secure against exile and disintegration. God has determined the time of the "end," and has not divulged it to any prophet. Before the redemption, Israel's sins must be atoned for either through repentance or through affliction. The merit of the fathers will not influence the redemption. Resurrection will occur soon after the ingathering.

From the fertile prophecies of Isaiah Don Isaac takes the following telling features. The ten tribes will be rediscovered and restored. Scriptural references to their return do not signify the conversion of distant nations to Christianity. A descendant of the Davidic family will be the restorer and ruler of Israel. Universal peace will prevail. Most nations

will adopt monotheism. Christendom cannot claim success in this direction because it represents today only a minority of mankind. Asia and Africa are still idolatrous. To the panorama of the utopian future Jeremiah adds the enlargement of the city of Jerusalem. It is wrong to assume with the symbolists that the promise is of a heavenly Jerusalem since actual places and boundaries are stated. The prophet Ezekiel tells of changes in the Temple services and stresses the war with Gog and Magog and the horrible fate that will overtake them. The minor prophets, Psalms and Daniel have a distinct messianic tone. As in the rest of his theology so here Abravanel was an eclectic. He gathered up the thoughts of many and let them pass through the sieve of his own mind. That is why his treatment of the doctrine is so complete.

Redemption is a double necessity. First, it is a necessity of the cosmic order. The belief prevailed in talmudic times that the world's duration is divided into seven millenniums corresponding to the six days of creation and the seventh of Sabbath. At the end of the seventh millennium the world will be destroyed. At the completion of the sixth epoch, before the final cataclysm, all mankind must return to God. For the Almighty had a purpose in forming the world; it was, that mankind should accept His principles of peace and uprightness. Neither mankind in general, nor Israel in particular, has lived up to His sovereign purpose. Since the sin of Adam, men



have sinned; they have belied God and creation. The world has become alienated from Him. Therefore, that His work shall not have been in vain, and to vindicate Himself, He must redeem mankind through Israel.

Redemption is also necessary for the nation Israel and for the holy land. God has guaranteed Israel's imperishability. The doctrine that the eternal God will never suffer His chosen seed to become the prey of hostile powers is the undercurrent that nourished the fertile minds of the prophets and revived the dried bones of the people. God has willed that Israel should aspire to eternity and has made her strong against the vicissitudes of time and place. As for the exile, it is the consequence of the people's deviation from the Almighty, and does not mark His severance from them.

This double necessity gives rise to a twofold purpose. The first is national, and may be viewed from two aspects. In relation to Israel, the redemption will be beneficial. The Lord will repay His people for the intolerable affliction, which prevented their consecration to His service. Following from this is the penal purpose in relation to other nations. God will wreak vengeance upon them for their rejection of the Law and their ill-treatment of the Jews. The nations violated the fundamental laws of universal morality. One of the prophets predicted the utter ruin of Damascus and Amon for cruel treatment of the Gileadites; of Phoenicia and Philistia



for their barbarous slave trade; and lastly of Edom for faithlessly violating a brother's oath. The coming redemption has a larger, a universal side to it. God is the God of all the world and all mankind. He does not desire a temple home in Zion, for Heaven is His throne, the earth is His footstool, and the whole earth is full of His glory. His aim is to benefit mankind ultimately. Through Him the redemption of all humanity will be effected.

For the sake of clearness the author divides time into three intervals. During the first period the Messiah cannot and will not come. During the second his advent is possible, depending upon the people's merit. Then there is the period in which he must necessarily appear. Whether redemption can be hastened by repentance is a moot question as appears from a talmudic debate between R. Joshua and R. Eliezer. The latter asserts: "If Israel repent they will be redeemed, but not otherwise." Said R. Joshua to him: "According to you, if they do not repent, they will not be redeemed at all?" To this R. Eliezer replied: "The Holy One, blessed be He, will appoint for this purpose a king whose decrees against Israel will be as severe as Haman's. This will bring them back to the better side." Abravanel adjusts the two conflicting views to his own division of conditional and unconditional periods. In the conditional era, redemption may be achieved by expiation and piety. As in the realm of nature water extinguishes fire, so in the spiritual world repentance

can wash away the stain of sin and hasten the Messiah's advent. And repentance, according to our Spanish Jew, does not consist in flagellation and self-mortification as Christian monks imagined but in heartfelt recognition and avowal of God. In the unconditional era, the Messiah must appear whether Israel is worthy or not. If we accept the traditional view the order of events will be as follows: sin will be followed by punishment, punishment by repentance, and repentance by redemption. But when the pre-ordained "end" has arrived, repentance is not a *conditio sine qua non*. Deliverance must inevitably ensue, even though there is no repentance.

The Messiah's advent must not be abortive like the early bloom of spring that is followed by the frost. In so far as it is potential in the conditional era, we are right in saying that it is delayed by the unworthiness of the people. However, just as fruit which ripens in season is better than fruit that matures sooner by the use of artificial stimuli, so Israel should wait uncomplainingly for the decreed end and not hasten it before the ordained time. Were the Messiah to appear too soon, he would come as an unripe fruit and the people's deliverance would not be complete. They would be freed from their oppressors, but there would be no ingathering of the exiles, nor any of the miraculous events. Aside from these considerations, the messianic era proper cannot begin while the nations are still exercising their sway. The merits of the patriarchs which helped to

reduce the duration of the Egyptian servitude will not foreshorten the future redemption nor, conversely, will the activities of sinners hinder it when the decreed end arrives. The counsel of Abravanel to fallen Israel then is not to speed the end, but simply to wait for the time appointed which is sure to come. As a practical man of affairs he recognized that neither piety nor uprightness would save the Jews from the machinations of their vicious foes.

There is an interesting legend which makes the advent contingent upon the nation's regeneration and which could therefore be referred to the conditional era. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi visited the Messiah at the gates of Rome and asked him when he would come. He answered, "This day." When Joshua met Elijah, the latter questioned him as to what the Messiah had said. Joshua replied that the Messiah had said, "Peace be with thee, son of Levi." Said Elijah, "He assured thee of a share for thyself and for thy father in the world to come." Joshua rejoined, "He mocked at me by saying that he will come this day." And Elijah answered, "This day, in the sense of Psalm 95:7, 'Today, if ye would but hearken to His voice.'"

The intensity with which the people visualized the advent lent it a greater reality than the events of their daily life. It was a force vivante, which buoyed up their dispirited hearts, and in time of back-sliding deterred them from further sin and



reminded them of their filial duty to their Heavenly Father. To Abravanel, as to the good soul in every age, the hope of the Messiah's coming was an ever present ideal. He had faith that he himself was living in the appointed time, and that the troublesome events of the day were the "Woes of the Messiah." Moreover, the Messiah was already born and on his mission to free Israel. He might come this day or the next.

In his efforts to calculate the "end," Abravanel does not pass unnoticed the caution of the rabbis disparaging such attempts, "because the calculators usually err, and when the appointed time comes and the Messiah does not appear, they say he will not come any more." He therefore finds it necessary to defend himself against those who would twit him for engaging in a quest so vague, in a task so enigmatic. He is aware that he treads on forbidden ground. In order to obtain the exact messianic year one must be able to read the very mind of the all-knowing One. Even Daniel who received an oracle that contained the coveted information admitted that he heard, but understood not. Abravanel thus appears extremely bold in his own eyes in venturing to publish with any degree of assurance the "year of wonders." But there is another horn to the dilemma. Would great saints and scholars such as Saadia, Rashi, Abraham bar Hiyya and Nahmanides have made messianic announcements if Judaism had really forbidden it! Hence it must be that the objection was



against those only who compute the end from the false science of astrology. There can be no reasonable objection to deriving it from holy writ and Abravanel's own efforts are applied to an earnest elucidation of the relevant biblical and rabbinical passages. Thus he stands on firm ground. But bearing in mind the fruitless results of earlier calculations, he refuses to vouch for the absolute truth of his deductions. He can only speculate, not prophesy. His putative end has not the certitude of a Mosaic law. Even if his figures prove wrong nevertheless his trust in God to deliver Israel will remain firm. An investigation such as he undertakes has dangers but it is worth while. He concedes that the year of wonders will be unknown and unknowable during the dispersion and will be disclosed only near its close. The state of affairs will then prove clearly that the blissful hour has struck.

Abravanel's computations like those of many others were governed by the very old belief that the world will endure six thousand years. As he was living in the sixth millennium, he had to fix the date for that epoch. According to the Jewish calendar Abravanel lived from 5197 to 5268. The redemption must occur in the sixth millennium; to be exact, 5263 after creation, or 1503 C.E. Thus we read that the school of Elijah taught, "Two thousand years the world will exist without Law, two thousand years with Law, and two thousand years will form the messianic age; and because of our sins which are many

the latter era is belated." The last two thousand years Abravanel divides, making the fifth millenium the conditional, and the sixth millennium the unconditional period. However, the messianic regime will not flourish for the full two thousand years, for the fifth millennium will commence four hundred years after the destruction of the Temple by Titus in the year 3828. Four hundred years later, or 4228, is the time when the conditional era began.

The book of Daniel is a fertile source for such calculations. From it Abravanel derives the first year of the unconditional era. Ch. 7, v. 25 reads: "And he shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High; and he shall think to change the seasons and the Law; and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and half a time." Abravanel controverts the Christian interpretation of this verse and chapter as applying to the Antichrist who will flourish for three and a half years and will then be slain. For the Christian interpreters understood "time" to mean one year. He takes it to be 410 years, the period of the first Temple. His computation, therefore, is as follows: 410 (time) plus 820 (times) plus 205 ( $\frac{1}{2}$  time) equals 1435. These many years Israel will be subject to Rome and the nations. The year 1435 added to 3828 (when the second Temple was razed) equals 5263 or 1503 c.E., which will mark the termination of the hostile empires and the supremacy of Israel. In this year Abravanel expected the Messiah. He

gives an identical calculation for Daniel 8:13-14 and 12:4.

Another supporting passage from Daniel 12:12, reads: "Happy is he that waiteth and cometh to the 1335 days." Taking "yamim" to mean years and adding the numerical value of its letters yod, mem, yod, mem, which amount to one hundred, to the 1335, he gets 1435; this added to the year 3828, when the second Temple was destroyed, equals 5263 or 1503 C.E. Thus did many otherwise brilliant medieval minds spend themselves on mystical and messianic mathematics.

## 2

ABRAVANEL'S BOOK *Yeshuot Meshiho* has a rare value as a compilation of rabbinic data and legends used by apostates to prove the authenticity of their Messiah. We shall illustrate their claims that the Messiah had already come and give the argument of Abravanel. Genesis 49:10, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh come (ad ki yabo shiloh)", is offered as proof of the Messiah's advent. The Christian argument is that the scepter of Judah means the sanhedrin. Now the talmud observes that the Court was ejected from the Temple forty years before the destruction. According to Christian interpretation then Jacob predicted that the Court shall flourish, "until Shiloh (the Messiah, Jesus) come."



Since the Sanhedrin ceased, the Messiah had come. Abravanel refuted this proposition as follows. The apostate omitted part of the above talmudic statement to the effect that the lawgivers of the people of Judea will not cease to teach the laws to Israel until Shiloh, who is the Messiah, shall come. The phrase omitted conveys the view that even if the court had ceased to function, so long as the law-makers, represented by the sages of subsequent ages, flourish and continue to shepherd Israel in dispersion, the time is not ripe for the veritable Messiah to appear. Furthermore, the view that the rod of Judah symbolizes the court is one individual's. Other opinions have it that the rod refers to the exilarchs of Babylon, and the lawgiver to the descendants of Hillel of Davidic lineage who spread learning. Thus the prediction relates to the long succession of future scholars and leaders, and the gist of the verse is that Judah will not lack spiritual leaders prior to the Messiah's arrival. This interpretation is in accord with the opinion that the Messiah will not come until judges and officers ceased to function in Israel.

Another inference is drawn from Deut. 30:5, "And the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed and thou shalt possess it." R. Jose concludes that Israel was promised only two possessions of Palestine. This is ammunition to Christian propagandists, who infer that since the two possessions are those of the conquest under Joshua



and the return under Ezra, there will be no third possession. This, affirms Abravanel, is plainly contrary to Jewish belief, and he disposes of the Christian surmise by declaring that the return of the Jews under Ezra cannot be regarded as a possession, since they were continually under the heel of other nations. The second acquisition of Palestine by the Jews, therefore, must occur in the future.

A curious legend tells of an incident that happened to a certain Jew who was engaged in plowing. An Arab passed and heard the ox bellow. Said the Arab: "Son of a Jew, loose thy oxen, loose thy plows, for the Temple of the Jews is destroyed." The Jew did so. The ox then bellowed a second time. Said the Arab: "Yoke thy oxen, yoke thy plows, for the Messiah has just been born." But the Jew asked, "What is his name?" The Arab said, "Menahem." "And what is the name of his father?" "Hezekiah." "Where was he born?" The Arab answered, "In Bethlehem, Judah." The Jew then sold his oxen and his plows and became a trader of infants' swaddling clothes. He went from city to city until he came to Bethlehem, Judah. There all the women gathered to buy clothes for their children. Said he to them: "Does the mother of Menahem dwell among you?" "Yes," they replied. And when he found her he said to her, "Why dost thou not come and buy for Menahem, thy son?" She replied, "Luck has been bad, for on the day that he was born the Temple was laid waste." Whereupon he left; later

he returned and said to her, "But we trust that even as through him it was laid waste, so through him it will be rebuilt." She answered, "Did I not tell you the last time you were here, that luck was bad? It has continued so. Winds and tempests have come and snatched him away from me."

This legend is used to bolster up the argument that the Messiah had been born, and that he is identical with the Christian savior, who was born about the time of Jerusalem's downfall. Abravanel takes this legend to refer to Jewish life. The legendary birth of the Messiah on the disastrous day means that God conceived a plan for Israel's deliverance at that time. That the Messiah will come as successor and by virtue of David, is suggested from the word Bethlehem, the birthplace of David. He will be a comforter (Menahem) and will be like unto Hezekiah in good deeds. The Jews will become itinerant traders. The nations will recognize their usefulness as merchants and will patronize them. The sinister spirits which snatched the infant away are the sins and evils that retard the Messiah's advent.

Abravanel considers Isaiah 53 very minutely, and marshals his reasons to prove the error of non-Jewish theologians who regard the entire chapter as testimony of their savior's divinity. Actually the contents of the chapter are incompatible with the history of Jesus. In his customary way the author poses several questions along which his investigation proceeds; the answers to these queries furnish the

exposition of the chapter. Who is the subject of the chapter? "Learned Christians claim him to be the man who was crucified in Jerusalem toward the close of the era of the second Temple and who, they say, was the son of God, and took flesh in the virgin's womb, as is stated in their writings." How is the messianic interpretation of Is. 52:13-15 by the midrash to be justified? Why does the prophet use the term "man," which implies a single individual? Which nation is involved in the subject's suffering?

Abravanel avers that he can choose between two alternative interpretations; the more likely one takes him as Israel, as in other passages where "My servant" means Israel. Moreover, the chapter under discussion is found between the two sections, 52:12 and 54:1, both of which treat of the nation. Israel is conceived of as a unit; the term man may denote the genus man collectively rather than a specific person. "Our sickness" and "our pains" need not mean the sicknesses borne by the nations but those inflicted by them upon Israel. The nations will confess that they were the agents of Israel's affliction. They had thought that "by his stripes they were healed"; that by harassing Israel they would obtain prosperity and peace for themselves. Hence they were bent on Israel's destruction.

The sage attacks the doctrine that the acclaimed Messiah had for his mission the salvation of mankind from original sin. It is argued that Jesus saved man's soul from eternal punishment imposed for



the original sin of Adam. Abravanel refutes this proposition as ungrounded, for nowhere does scripture state that Adam's soul was doomed to hell. Even if Adam had sinned and was punished spiritually, why should his sin and doom be inherited by subsequent generations? It is true that the mortal body can inherit sin and weakness, but the soul being divine, comes from a pure source, untainted, and therefore should not be liable for Adam's disobedience. Granting that mortals inherit sinfulness from Adam, are we to believe that it is impossible for the Almighty to forgive? Must He become incarnate and endure suffering? Logic and justice demand that the sinner be punished and not the one who is sinned against. If it appears plausible that one being should bear the sin of mankind and suffer for all, then that being might conceivably be a prophet, or a saint, but not God. Moreover, the Christian doctrine is based on an impossibility, namely, that the Deity can be corporeal.

Further difficulties rising out of the Christological interpretation of the chapter show that it cannot refer to Jesus.

1. "Behold, my servant, yaskil (shall prosper)." If we translate yaskil, "he shall become wise," it would imply that God Jesus had previously lacked wisdom. This is inconceivable, as God's wisdom is eternal. If we translate, "he shall prosper," it becomes absurd, for how can a condition of prosperity or success be predicated of the Godhead? Even



humanly speaking, it cannot be said that Jesus prospered, because of his tragic end.

2. How can the term servant be applied to one who spiritually and intellectually is supreme, a God?

3. The words, "He shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high," cannot describe him humanly, because of his unhappy life. If the words are construed metaphorically they must refer to God.

4. "He had no form nor comeliness that we should look upon him. Nor beauty that we should delight in him," cannot be said of Jesus, for history reports him to have been attractive in appearance. If the verse describes his condition at death, there is nothing singular about it, because it is true of every dead person.

5. "Surely our diseases he did bear..." cannot refer to Jesus' release of the souls doomed in hell for the sin of the first parent, because spiritual penalty is never called sickness.

6. "Lamo" is plural, "to them," and indicates that the subject spoken of in the singular throughout must be a virtual plural, the nation Israel.

7. "They made his grave with the wicked." His grave, says Abravanel, was not molested. Interest centered only in his death. The other expression, "And with the rich, his tomb," shows conclusively that reference is not to him, for history records nothing about his tomb after the third day.

8. "Yet it pleased the Lord to crush him by disease." If Jesus wished to save the wicked from

perdition then he assumed responsibility for his sufferings, and it is wrong to argue that God willed it.

9. "That he might see his seed, prolong his days." Jesus died young and left no descendants. The verse cannot refer to his adherents and disciples, because "seed" is never used metaphorically but always of physical offspring.

10. "And he shall divide the spoil with the mighty." Nowhere do we read that he plundered.

With the same painstaking care Abravanel deals in another book with the visions of Daniel, the core of which he found to be the successive sway of the world empires, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, and the permanent messianic state.

### 3

AS IF the career of the Jews were not painful enough to warrant the immediate coming of their redeemer, the people colored the age before the advent with even more livid and somber hues. The gulf between the now and the hereafter was widened to magnify the benevolence of God, when He would intervene in their behalf. More, the darker the night the brighter must the morrow be. All their adversities were intensified a thousandfold. The evils of the sinister prelude to the new age will beggar description. Mankind will reach the lowest pitch, the abyss of deterioration. The earmarks of the age will be

social debasement, the spread of heresy over the world, the violation of sacred family ties, and acute physical anguish because of the lack even of bare necessities. Under the political aspect are included the expansion of the wicked empire Rome over the entire world and the collapse of Jewish communal life in Palestine and in the diaspora. No semblance of independent jurisdiction will survive. This inevitable state, known as the birth travails of the Messiah, will be temporary. According to the talmudic account which Abravanel follows it will last for seven years. As the blackness and gloom of the night are dispelled by the first rays of the dawning sun, so shall the dazzling radiance of the Messiah's light penetrate and gladden the heart of Israel.

Abravanel felt that the rabbinic word pictures of chaos, penury and degeneration in the pre-messianic era fitted his own times. We can surmise how insufferable Jewish life was. The statement that the whole world must be converted to *minuth*, heresy, before the Messiah's arrival was confirmed by the spread of heresy in Judaism. More especially did he see these ominous predictions come true in the church reform movements. The hypocrisy and the worldliness of the higher clergy and the common monks of the Catholic church did not escape his notice. During this time, "Ecclesiastical Rome offered a spectacle of moral corruption and spiritual degeneracy which has been compared to the corrupt age



of the Roman Empire." Little wonder then that he believed he was living in the Age of Woe.

Though Abravanel refuses to be counted among the mystics, he nevertheless manifests sympathy for several of their views. He quotes the statement that the son of David will not come until the Treasure House had been emptied of its souls. The mystical notion is that the number of souls that are to enter earthly bodies had been fixed at creation and that they had all been formed simultaneously with the soul of Adam. In the course of time these souls take up their abode in the "lower world," the earth. As long as some souls remain in the depository, the Messiah's advent is prevented. Just as the generation that left Egypt could not enter the holy land but perished in the desert as expiation for their sinfulness, so in the next conquest of Palestine all souls destined to inhabit earthly bodies must leave the Treasure House before redemption occurs. Good deeds and repentance can hasten the arrival of the Messiah by emptying the storehouse of souls more rapidly. For the souls that inhabited the bodies of unworthy people will be condemned to transmigrate. Hence the supply of original souls in the Treasure House will be exhausted slowly.

The Messiah son of Joseph should properly be considered a pre-messianic figure. He will be a forerunner of the Messiah son of David. His other name, son of Ephraim, denotes more clearly that his origin is to be of the tribe of Ephraim. During the



war of the nations he will arise in Rome, gather the Jews in the sacred land, and reestablish their state. He will distinguish himself on the field of battle. After much suffering he will meet death in Palestine at the enemy's hands. His successor will be the son of David, to whom he will be inferior in every way, in the possession of an ideal character, in the performance of miracles, and in the organization of a political state. The belief in an Ephraimitic Messiah arose out of the double idea inherent in the conception of a political and a spiritual emancipator. The Messiah son of Joseph can only be conceived of in the former light. This explains why Akiba proclaimed Bar Kochba, though not of Davidic descent, the Messiah. Bar Kochba played the role of a military and political hero.

Abravanel is the only writer in Jewish theology who alludes to the Antichrist. He invents the ingenious theory that the belief in a Messiah son of Joseph has been adopted by Christianity with only a single modification, the change of name. Christian expositors find the latter-day antagonist of the church prefigured in the book of Daniel. "The little horn" mentioned in ch. 7, v. 8 is the antichristian power destined to arise in the future. His activity will extend over three and a half years, for "time" is taken to signify one year. His functions are all those of the Messiah son of Joseph including vengeance upon Israel's foes. Declaring that the Messiah had already come in the person of Jesus, the

early Christians still had serious apprehensions that the redeemer awaited by the Jews might appear and frustrate the messiahship of Jesus. To discredit the Jewish Messiah they invented the belief in an anti-messiah.

The future deliverance will not come about through the capricious will of an earthly ruler whose decree may be rescinded by a successor. It will be absolute. In this respect it will be singularly different from the many times Israel had gained release from tyrannous rulers. The good-will of Cyrus permitted Israel to return to Babylon, only to be undone by the despotism of succeeding monarchs. But future redemption carries with it the intrinsic stipulation that God himself will be the redeemer.

Of this train of thought is the striking parable to illustrate the verse: "In Thy light do we see light." A man was walking by the light of a candle at night. As often as he lit it, the light went out. Then he exclaimed, "How long shall I weary myself? I will wait here until sunrise and will proceed by the light of the sun." Thus it happened with Israel. When they were enslaved by Egypt, Moses arose as redeemer; when exiled in Babylon, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah redeemed them; when oppressed by the Medes, Mordecai and Esther redeemed them. Then they were enslaved by Rome, whereupon Israel exclaimed, "We are wearied by the intermittent redemptions and enslavements; we

do not desire the light brought by man, but from now on we will wait for God to light the way."

The principal feature of the redemption is the ingathering of the exiles. In the minds of the rabbis it was equal to the work of creation. The clearest statement of it is given in Isaiah 43:5-6, "Fear not, for I am with thee; I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north: 'Give up,' and to the south: 'Keep not back,' bring My sons from far, and My daughters from the end of the earth." Salvation will not be complete until all Israel has been sifted from among the nations, leaving no Israelite in dispersion. Those who have left the faith and others who have removed the traces of circumcision in order to be known as Gentiles will, if they renounce their godless ways, share in the redemption. The mere commission of sin does not exclude one from the Jewish fold. Impenitent sinners will perish in the Age of Woe, very much as the generation of the desert had to be consumed before the people's entrance into the holy land. The heathen population will decrease as a consequence of the final wars. Those surviving annihilation will hail the sovereignty of God, who will bestow upon them a share in the joys of the bliss-spreading era.

The lost ten tribes surely will be included in the restoration. The dissenting opinion of the tanna Rabbi Akiba does not infringe upon the doctrine of a universal Jewish ingathering. According to Abra-



vanel, Akiba denied the return of those Northern exiles who had settled in Babylon, for the obvious reason that they became extinct; either they perished from unfavorable climatic conditions or had become part and parcel of the native people. However, the progeny of the ten tribes who fled to Judah, to Egypt and to other surrounding states, would be included in the general reunion.

The deliverance from Egypt is the archetype for future redemption which however unlike the former will embrace all mankind. The prophets and sages felt very profoundly the likeness in scope and nature between the two events. The exodus came at the beginning of Israel's career, when for the first time it clashed with a foreign power; the future deliverance will witness Israel's final emancipation and its sway over all nations. The redeemer at his noblest will be but a replica of the grand personality of Moses, whose prophetic intuition, divine attachment, prudence in practical affairs and self-sacrifice he will embody. The future redemption will be actual and physical as was the exodus and not, as the Christians hold, a salvation from sin. Like the exodus the final deliverance will be in Nisan, and the dissenting view that places it in Tishri applies to the victory over Gog and Magog which will complete the pageant of redemption. Then also, as formerly, Israel will acclaim the kind providence of God and chant a paean of victory to him. Because the return from Babylon was not comparable in its



marvels to the exodus and fell short of it in many respects, it could not have been the final deliverance envisioned by the prophets.

A distinction exists between the advent of a personal Messiah as the key to the millennium, and the attainment of national and universal perfection without him. To Abravanel the Messiah was indispensable. Unlike the view of skeptics that the Messiah would not come and the Christian view that he came in the person of Jesus, a fundamental Jewish principle asserts that the Messiah will inaugurate the millennium. He must appear because God had vowed to David to perpetuate his dynasty.

Rabbi Hillel's categorical statement that Israel has no Messiah because they had already 'consumed' him in the days of King Hezekiah is explained in two ways. One is that the sage had reference to the conditional period when the Messiah might be expected as a reward for the nation's merits. Whatever merit Israel possessed had been rewarded in the time of Hezekiah, in the miraculous overthrow of Sennacherib. Another plausible explanation is that the amora denied intervention of a messianic personality, but not the other conventional features of redemption such as the ingathering, vengeance and resurrection. R. Hillel, forsooth, was satisfied that Hezekiah had embodied the characteristics of the Messiah. This king was a sprout of the branch of Jesse. He had the spirit of wisdom and judged the poor with righteousness. He was humble, placing his

reliance in God. Hence one of the names of the Messiah is Menahem ben Hezekiah. In a curious legend we are informed that because of the ingratitude and pride he displayed on several occasions he forfeited the messiahship. At any rate Hillel assumed, explains Abravanel, that the messianic type of leader had already appeared and that the restoration of Israel will be achieved without one.

The coming Messiah will be of the royal line of Solomon and David who traced their ancestry still further back to Ruth the Moabitess. As Moses was born in Egypt and Zerubabel in Babylon, so the Messiah will be born of the exiles in the Roman imperium. Where mention is made of Bethlehem as his birthplace, it refers to his origin from Davidic dynasty. As soon as he sees the light of the world, his father will die. For a long time he will live unrecognized and ridiculed, and then he will make a sudden appearance. His functions are not superficial or formal. First and foremost, he will free Israel from the oppressor's yoke. He will bring light to those in the darkness of affliction. In recognition of this mission the rabbis call him Menahem, comforter; Nehorah, light; Huliah, he will save from suffering. Israel scattered to the four ends of the earth will gather about his standard, and he will lead them to the sacred land. The nations which had harassed Israel will suffer extinction at his hand. He will cast down from their 'celestial abodes' the tutelary pow-

ers who had theretofore acted as mediators for their earthly clients.

The Messiah's advent will affect not only Israel, but all mankind. Analogous to the creation of man on the sixth day will be the advent of the Messiah in the sixth millennium; and man's lordship over all the previously created, symbolizes the Messiah's rule over all nations. His empire will be as far-flung as that of the world conquerors. He will not live forever; it is the perpetuity of his dynasty that is vouchsafed. He will restore to his age what previous generations had forfeited through Adam's fatal sin; heavenly radiance, length of life, stature, plentiful harvests and the pristine brightness of the luminaries. He will renew prophecy, which has been discontinued since the dispersion.

The soul of the Messiah came into being on the first day of creation. Rabbinic passages which tell of his premundane existence prove the teleological object of God in the universe. The world is a purposive, ever-developing organism. At different stages the plans of God are unfolded. So also the Messiah's appearance is an event predestined in the mind of the Creator. The passage stating that seven things were created before the world was made, torah, repentance, reward and punishment, the throne of God, the temple and the name Messiah,—means that their underlying ontological principles were fixed before creation. We can therefore affirm that



the Messiah's birth preceded creation not actually, but in God's purpose and will.

The Messiah will be neither God, nor son of God. Our author stresses his human birth. Though earthly in every respect, he will be the holiest of the holy, a superman, attaining the acme of perfection possible to a mortal. He will best exemplify the true spirit of lovingkindness and godliness. The supreme virtues of the great men of the bible will be his. He will be master of himself, subduing his sensual impulses. In judicial insight and fairness, in support of the defenseless and in the fearless espousal of truth he will be a second Solomon. In magnanimity he will excel Abraham and in faithful leadership of the people he will surpass Moses. In prophetic power only will he fall short of Moses. Intellectuality, physical prowess and piety, qualities which are not frequently found in one person, will be combined in him. The Messiah will possess Solomon's wisdom, David's valor and Hezekiah's divine awe. His ties of attachment to God will prove unbreakable and unassailable. While as a political figure he will rank with David, in reliance upon God Hezekiah will be his prototype. His noble character and exalted station are attested by the names, Peace, Dignity, Grace, which the rabbis gave him.

Abravanel rejects the belief of Christianity that the Messiah is divine, that he has already appeared, and that the Old Testament has been abrogated by a new one. Often he feels that the opponents mali-



ciously tampered with the text or in their ignorance misunderstood it. The citation from *Genesis Rabba* Rabbati to the effect that the ten kings who ruled the earth were God, Nimrod, Joseph, Solomon, Nebuchadrezzar, Darius, Cyrus, Alexander, Augustus and the Messiah, is offered as proof that the Messiah is divine. Here God is mentioned first and the Messiah last. In Isaiah 44:6 God declares: "I am the first, and I am the last." Therefore God and the Messiah are one. In refutation Abravanel regards the quotation as erroneous and cites a parallel passage in the *Chapters of R. Eliezer* which gives the following order: God, Nimrod, Joseph, Solomon, Ahab, Nebuchadrezzar, Darius, Alexander, Messiah and God.

In a midrashic comment on Canticles 3:11, "The crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him," God is said to call Israel daughter, then sister, and lastly mother. From this it is inferred that God had a mother and was partly mortal. According to our sage, however, the three female relationships are given in a parable of a king. And he also observes that the relation of motherhood must be taken figuratively or else we must believe that He had a daughter and a sister as well.

The word "vine" in Gen. 40:9 is taken by the midrash to refer to Israel or the Messiah. It goes on to say that there is a planting below, and a planting from above and below. The planting below is Abraham; the planting below and above is the

Messiah. The latter thought leads the apostate to conclude that the Messiah is constituted of a dual nature, divine and human. To our author it merely means that the power of the Messiah will overwhelm the celestial 'patrons,' the protecting powers of the nations, as well as all earthly rulers.

Ps. 2:2, "Nashku bar," according to the apostates, means "embrace the son," the divine Messiah, son of God. Even if "bar" meant "son," notes Abravanel, it would not apply to the Messiah but to Israel, so frequently called God's son as, "My son, My first born son, is Israel" and "Ye are children of the Lord your God." But the word as the midrash further explains connotes the spiritual food of the torah, to be received by Gentiles in the messianic future.

An unusual midrash is offered to show that the Christian Messiah was conceived of a virgin. Israel sinned through a maiden for, "There their virgin breasts were bruised" (Ezek. 23:3). Israel was smitten through a maiden for, "They have ravished the women in Zion, the maidens in the cities of Judah" (Lam. 5:11). It will be comforted through a maiden, "For the Lord hath created a new thing . . . a woman shall court a man" (Jer. 31:22). R. Huna declared that the last passage implies the birth of the Messiah and offered Ps. 2:7 in support: "This day have I (God) begotten thee." All this, maintains the apostate, proves that the mother of the Messiah was conceived of God. Such a conclusion betrays a mistaken view of biblical style and

thought. The word "maiden" is used figuratively of Israel. It describes the purity of Israel's attachment to God. So long as Israel does not bow down or compromise with other gods, she is a "virgin". But she has sinned and become corrupted by her intercourse with other religions. Before the redemption she will forsake her evil associations and with her former fidelity pursue her divine lover.

The notion of a suffering Messiah in line with Christian teaching was derived by the Dominicans from a legend in the Bereshith Rabba of R. Moses ha-Darshan. Said Satan before the Holy One, blessed be He, "O Lord of the universe, this light which is concealed beneath Thy celestial throne, for whom is it?" Satan then said, "Allow me, and I will foil the king and his generation." The Holy One, blessed be He, answered, "You will not overcome him." To which Satan replied: "Permit me and I will overcome him." Whereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke: "If that is your intention, I will destroy Satan from the world and one belonging to that generation." Thereupon God stipulated with the Messiah and said, "O my righteous Messiah, the sins of those who are concealed with thee are destined to bring thee under a severe yoke. Thine eyes will not see the light, thine ears will hear scorn from the heathen world, thy nostrils will inhale ill odors, thy mouth will taste bitterness, thy tongue will cleave to thy palate, thy skin will be fast on thy bones, thy soul will faint in sorrow and sighing.



What is thy pleasure? If thou acceptest them, well; if not, forthwith will I annihilate thee." The Messiah replied: "I will gladly submit to suffering on condition that Thou wilt revive the dead that died in my day and from the time of Adam to the present. And not only such as are interred but even those that have been devoured by wolves and lions, and those who have been drowned, also the nephilim (the fallen angels), aye, even those who have not yet been created but whom the Lord intends to create." The Holy One, blessed be He, acceded. Forthwith the Messiah assumed all sufferings in love.

Abravanel attacks the veracity of the legend in this form and offers a variant in the *Pesikta Rabbati*, in which Israel addresses God and anticipates the blissful future in return for loyalty to the Law. Again, the Ephraimite Messiah is definitely alluded to. As for the redeemer's sufferings, they are described in a word or two, whereas the antagonist's citation dwells upon them more fully and acutely. Finally, this version relates that the redeemer will endure affliction for one week. Abravanel discerns in this unusually fantastic midrash, the symbolic presentation of certain well-known features of the messianic drama. Light in religious imagery is everywhere the symbol of knowledge and wisdom, and in this instance the wide-spread prevalence of these two blessings is betokened. The concealment of the light under the divine throne indicates that the Almighty had preordained the



spiritual and intellectual illumination of the human race at the advent. Satan in the story personifies the evil impulse in man, which because of its materiality and allurements will not give up its hold upon man, and thus will retard the perfection of the race and the sway of the Messiah. The characterization of Satan as trembling and prostrate is an imaginative way of expressing the fright and suppression of evil.

The reference to the Ephraimite Messiah shuts out the possibility of identifying the founder of the Church with the subject of the tale. The sufferings mentioned may then be connected with the traditional accounts of the wars and the death of the Messiah son of Ephraim. Abravanel argues that the antagonist obviously distorted the story and dwelt upon the supposed Messiah's personal grief in order to bear out the New Testament story of his agony. The nephilim are those who have fallen away from the faith, and at that time will be reclaimed. "Those who had ascended into the divine Mind, but had not been created," are the unknown descendants of the Jewish stock, born and nurtured in Christendom, who will retrace their steps and be included in the restoration.

## 4

REMEMBERING the physical and spiritual sufferings to which Abravanel had been subjected by Christian princes and holy men one can readily understand the rancor in his soul which led him to believe that

Israel and Christendom were hereditary foes. Whether on his own soil or in exile, "the sin of Edom is the unrelenting blood-feud with which he follows his brother Judah." Christendom, or Roman power, grew out of the biblical race of Edom. The soul of Esau, father of the Edomite race, passed into Jesus. The hostility can be traced back to the dim past. In their mother's womb the twin progenitors of these races vied with each other. The prenatal encounter between Jacob and the prince of Edom presages the prolonged contest between the nations. But the time will come when Edom's inveterate hatred will end and Israel ultimately will prove the victor. This will be at the redemption, for God's rule is incompatible with that of Caesarea. "The existence of one necessarily involves the destruction of the other."

There are several views as to the place of the messianic age in the sequence of the millennial drama. According to a very early conception, the messianic era will be part of the future world. Another view places it within the duration of the present world. In a third view, held by Abravanel, the messianic era is the interlude between the present and the future. It will extend from the ingathering of the dispersed to the resurrection. The latter event will start the supremely blissful era. It is therefore an intermediate and very necessary step in preparing mankind to receive God's highest boon.

Abravanel criticizes Maimonides for holding that

nature, human and cosmic, will continue in its wonted ways in the messianic era. The statement of the amora Samuel that there will be no difference between the present and the messianic age save in Israel's subjection to the nations, is on the surface contrary to the plain promises in the bible that the new order will be supernatural. It contradicts what Jews believe about the Messiah's superhuman perfection, the soil's excessive fertility, extraordinary vengeance upon foes, the innocence of mankind, and resurrection. In Abravanel's opinion Samuel did not deny the transcendental things foretold by the prophets but assigned them to an epoch beyond the messianic interim. The latter period will be simply a repetition of the times when Israel lived on her soil and was governed by God's appointed ones. The land which in ancient years flowed with milk and honey will in the future enjoy an equal degree of fertility. God will manifest Himself through miracles and signs as He did in bygone days through Moses, the judges and seers. Prophecy will be restored to those qualified to receive it. Poverty will not be uprooted, but as Moses declared for his own generation, "The poor shall never cease out of the land." Nor will the earth produce woven garments and baked cakes. The marked distinction, however, between the transitional messianic age and Israel's past history will consist in the subjection of all nations to Israel. Glorious as were the times of David and Hezekiah, yet Israel did not rule the world.



This leadership the reinstated people will enjoy in the messianic state. It must be noted that the generally accepted interpretation of this talmudic passage by Samuel is, contrary to Abravanel, that in the messianic era Israel will be free from subjection to the nations.

Our author justifies Maimonides for including the belief in resurrection among the thirteen cardinal principles of Judaism in this wise. It is distinctly taught in the written and oral law and constitutes a significant part of Jewish belief. Moses, Isaiah, Daniel and Malachi predicted it in unmistakable language. Although he is uncertain whether to accept Ezekiel's vision of the revival of the dry bones as a reality or a parable, it most assuredly teaches resurrection. Another factor that raises this belief to the rank of a cardinal principle is that it belongs to the category of reward and punishment, an indispensable and central teaching of Judaism. Abravanel holds the pragmatic viewpoint that the trend of the times determines which teachings should be stressed and raised to dogmatic importance. Thus he argues that Maimonides made the belief in providence with its corollaries of the messianic advent and resurrection dogmas, because the obvious injustice in the world and Israel's misery made people lose trust in God.

When resurrection and redemption are accomplished, the teachings of the Law concerning them will become worthless. This apparently involves a



change in the totality of the Law, and challenges the Maimonean doctrine that the law is immutable. But Abravanel clears the fog by stating that the point about these two beliefs is that the events were predicted by Israel's prophets, and that they occurred in the precise manner taught by the torah. He sets forth the principal points of the doctrine in the following systematic manner:

1. At death the body decomposes and is reduced to its elements. The spirit survives entire. It does not deteriorate. "The dust returns to earth as it was, the spirit returns to God, who gave it."

2. Resurrection will occur in the last flourishing era of the earth's duration and not at a period when the world will be destitute of flesh. It will take place when all the souls still remaining since creation in the depository of souls will at last have left to inhabit earthly bodies.

3. Fundamentally and actually, resurrection means that the same earthly bodies will receive the same souls. This precludes all other theories, such as transmigration or that the new person will be an ethereal creature composed of rare celestial matter.

4. The revived body will be the original person as he appeared before death.

5. Only a portion of Israel will be revived. At death it is decreed who will merit re-existence.

6. The purpose of this great miracle is to judge the complete person (body and spirit) fairly for his deeds.

7. The generation living at the time of the miracle will continue to live but will be tried on the Day of Judgment together with the resurrected. Then will ensue the true enjoyment of rewards in the soul-world.

8. Another purpose is to enable a large part of Israel, that through the ages succumbed to Gentile bestiality, to behold the ultimate triumph of their people and the benevolence of God. It would be unfair if the joys and victories of the new era should be witnessed only by those who happened to live at the redemption.

9. The revived will recognize each other and be reunited to their families and tribes.

10. One effect of the resurrection will be to induce Gentiles to turn to monotheism.

11. The reawakened life will not be wrought by a prophet or by God's messenger, or through the influence or incidence of the stars, but by God Himself.

12. Man is judged at three different moments. a. Every New Year for his earthly welfare. b. At death the soul is judged for admittance into the soul-world. c. On the Day of Judgment in the eschatological future for his eternal state.

13. Resurrection will occur among all classes of Israel and among the other peoples. "And thou seest that this faith is rooted in all Gentiles. They all believe that their dead will arise. Hence I maintain that at the coming resurrection our own people will

arise to be associated with the salvation of God, to stand up at judgment, and for the other purposes I have mentioned. And there will also arise from other nations in their lands, in every territory, domain, province and city, not only the righteous among them but also the wicked and the sinful, and they will be the more notorious among them. And it must be so in order to know and to make known, to broadcast throughout the world, the faith in God, blessed be He, that sages, priests and prophets be witnesses to this fact."

14. The revived will live a complete physical existence on a plane of innocence and righteousness. The notion that they will be spiritualized beings, although retaining their corporeal substance and frame, a theory entertained by Nahmanides, Crescas and Albo, is contradictory to accepted views. Abravanel also differed from Maimonides who was inclined to believe in the immortality of the soul rather than in a resurrected physical life.

In the messianic interim three fundamental changes will occur; man's inward regeneration, the restoration of Israel's religious life and of her political sovereignty. The new age will mark the perfection of mankind. The world will appear as though recreated in all freshness and fecundity. The innocence of childhood and the perfection of Adam before he sinned will be upon everyone. All impediments to right thinking and clean living will be uprooted. Man will be morally transformed and reno-



vated. His carnal impulses will be subdued. His evil nature will be purged. The best in him will seek spiritual harmony. The conquest of one's inmost and invisible enemy, the "evil inclination," will be the first step in attaining universal peace. For, declares Abravanel, the two chief causes of war are religious differences and the selfish instinct to have what does not rightfully belong to one. The purification of men's hearts, coupled with the universal acceptance of a common monotheistic creed, will assure perfect accord among individuals and nations. Even the beasts will outgrow their rapacity, and peacefulness and friendliness will mark their attitude toward one another and toward man. It is Abravanel's opinion that the last condition will prevail only in the holy land.

God is the life principle of the Jews. He is to Israel what rain is to the plant, the vitalizing force. In Him and through Him Israel finds spiritual sustenance. Regarding the Almighty in this light, the rehabilitation of their sacred institutions becomes an assured fact. The Law will never fall into oblivion for He Himself will impart its teachings and will make a new covenant with the people that they violate not His commands. The reasons for the inexplicable precepts will be revealed. The agadic statement that all festivals except Purim and the Day of Atonement will be suspended in the messianic time cannot mean that they will be abolished. because every scriptural law has eternally binding



power. It does mean that special remembrance of them will not be made, because the marvels of Israel's early career will be eclipsed by the transcendental character of the redemption. However the Day of Atonement which is the judgment day of Israel and of mankind and Purim which symbolizes the miracle of Jewish history will retain their full significance.

Abravanel refutes the proposition that the Mosaic laws will be abrogated in the new era. There is nothing in scripture nor in the oral law to support that contention. The ceremonial, the sacrificial and the agricultural laws will be renewed in the future. The observation that the third and fourth chiliads will be the age of the torah, should not lead one to infer that it will be abolished after that time. The torah is perpetual. The broad statement of R. Johanan to the effect that one may perform whatever a prophet commands even if contrary to the Law, except idolatry, seems to give basis to the charge that it was possible for Jesus to abolish it. Abravanel retorts that the provision of R. Johanan applied only to an exceptional case or to an emergency where certain laws might be violated or suspended. But it could give no sanction for the complete or permanent suspension of the torah. Any prophet who would dare to advocate its abolition will lose his authority.

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob symbolize the first, second, and third temples respectively.

As Abraham surpassed Isaac in many virtues so did the Temple of Solomon, built at the behest of God, possess more sacredness and grandeur than the second Temple. Isaac's failing vision in old age is analogous to the desecration of the second Temple by the pagan rulers. The first Temple was razed by the Babylonians, offspring of the "children of Ketura," one of Abraham's concubines, and the second Temple was leveled by Esau's descendants. The third Temple will last to eternity, for among the sons of Jacob there was none who left the patriarchal family to intermarry with the "daughters of the land."

The joy at the erection of the last sanctuary will exceed that of the days of Solomon and Ezra. This time its inviolability and perpetuity will be assured. The holy of holies, with all its sacred paraphernalia, the ark, the tables of the covenant, scroll of the Law, and the oil of anointment, will be restored. The *abodah*, or priestly service, as set forth by Moses, will be re-instituted. The sacrificial order mentioned in Ezekiel, chapters 45 and 46, which differs from the Mosaic prescriptions, will be in vogue during the dedication period only, in addition to the regular daily and festival sacrifices prescribed in the Pentateuch. Priests and levites will serve in their respective functions and will receive the customary sacrificial portions and sacerdotal revenues. Not all forms of sacrifices will be retained. The atonement and sin-offerings for instance will cease, for the

heart of man having been purified there will be no occasion for such sacrifices. Aye, the Temple will have lost its character as a place where expiation is to be made.

The enchanting but illusive hope of the Jews to return to the sacred soil has continued from the ancient times down to the present day and has exerted a most salutary influence on their preservation as a people. God has bound Himself to bestow the land as an abiding patrimony on the descendants of the patriarchs who despite their banishment are destined to regain it. Palestine is the chosen land, prepotent for idealism. It was the scene of Adam's formation, of the inspired experiences of the patriarchs, the land where the divine economic-agricultural laws were put in force. The future conquest of Palestine through the Messiah's activity will be the second time that Israel has acquired it, the first time having been under Joshua. The return under Ezra by the permission of Cyrus vassalized Israel. Since it had not been prompted by divine intervention the community in Palestine was no different from other Jewish settlements, like the one in Alexandria. In the future however Israel will be restored by God and will win permanent freedom. Royalty and priesthood will again be vested in the descendants of the original families.

The usual antithesis between earthliness and heavenliness will not exist for the Kingdom of God and the House of David will become one and the



same. Israel will no longer form a schismatic state. The prophet Ezekiel exquisitely expresses the union of the two kingdoms. The land will be equally divided into thirteen parts, twelve for the tribes and one for the city of Jerusalem including the sanctuary, dwellings for the priests and levites, and other necessary appurtenances. Of this thirteenth portion, an allotment will be made to the Nasi (Messiah), which must remain in its entirety and forever in the ruling Davidic dynasty. The enlarged unwallled boundaries of Jerusalem will enclose an area of thirteen square miles. The sanctuary and temple will occupy one and a half miles. Converts to Judaism will receive portions in the tribes to which they become attached.

Israel's felicity will be in proportion to the magnitude of her suffering in the diaspora. The future will be as sweet as the past was bitter. God will evince his special predilection for Palestine in concrete ways and will extend over it His special providence. Copious restitution will be made of all sacred vessels carried away from Jerusalem by the destroyers. Secure from foreign attack and with no cause to fear expulsion Israel will enjoy uninterrupted happiness. God will enter into a covenant with nature respecting the seasonal rains and the earth's productivity so that there will be neither drought nor famine. The fecundity of woman and the fruitfulness of the fields will be extraordinary. The lifespan will not be increased to what it was after



creation but none will die young. The "new heavens" predicted in Isaiah refers to the grand conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation Pisces, in the year 5224 (1464). This strange phenomenon, which has occurred only once before, at the exodus, portends the deliverance of Israel and the joys of the new age. One of the first and chief features of the new state, without which any picture of the utopia is incomplete, is the enlargement of the borders of Palestine proper. Israel will supersede the former world monarchies, and her sway will extend from sea to sea, that is, from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. Unlike all other people, she will not aggrrieve the surviving races and governments by the imposition of taxes and other severities.

Indeed Israel will wield not only political but also spiritual hegemony. The city of Jerusalem will be the heart of humanity. It will be the desire, the joy, the attachment of every heart: "For behold I create Jerusalem a rejoicing." The supreme sacredness of the ark in relation to other parts of the temple will be analogous to the central position which the temple will occupy in relation to the world. Significance will lie in its central position as a universal court of justice and arbitration. The king Messiah will be a "light," radiating justice, peace and truth for the guidance of men and nations. He will dominate not by the sword but by his word.

The sage glorifies in fantastic imagery the emi-

nence of Israel in the new day. She will be unique among the nations, and her phenomena will be comparable to those of celestial bodies. She will receive illumination direct from God and not from the sun: "For the Lord shall be thine everlasting light." Israel, like a heavenly sphere, will revolve through history but will not deteriorate in the process. She will undergo motion and change, but not decline.

Although at the dawn of history the nations rejected God's proffer of the Law, after the redemption they will crave His knowledge and will make pilgrimages to the holy land. The king Messiah will give the foreign peoples two commands, the booth (succah) and palm-branch (lulav), to commemorate his people's victory over Gog, the last of Israel's foes. Gentiles will be exempt from the biblical prohibitions of the food of unclean animals and of certain degrees of marriage. They will be in the same status as the generation of Noah which, while acknowledging God, had to observe only the seven basic laws of human society.

The nations will display their indebtedness to Israel in many ways. A significant legend illustrates the underlying thought of good will between Israel and the world at large. A king was once provoked to anger by his subjects and they begged the prince to intercede in their behalf. When the prince had reconciled his royal father, the people hurried to the king's palace to sing his praises. Then the king

exclaimed: "Is it to me that you sing praises? To my son are praises due; for were it not for him who entreated me, I would have laid waste the entire land." So does the verse read: "All nations clapped their hands." Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "Is it to me that you sing praises? You owe them to Israel, for were it not for Israel, this world would not exist."

## ABRAVANEL'S WORKS

### BIBLE COMMENTARIES ON:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve.

### PHILOSOPHIC WORKS:

Ateret Zekenim (Providence), Zurot Hayesodot (Forms), Mifalot Elohim (Creation), Shamayim Hadashim (Creation), Commentary on the Guide, Teshubot to queries of Saul Hacoheh, Rosh Amanah (Dogmas).

### MESSIANIC WORKS:

Mayene Hayeshua, Yeshuot Meshiho, Mashmia Yeshua.

### MISCELLANEOUS:

Nahlat Abot (Commentary on Ethics of the Fathers), Zebah Pesah (Commentary on Passover haggadah).





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